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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY

Magazine
Issue #16

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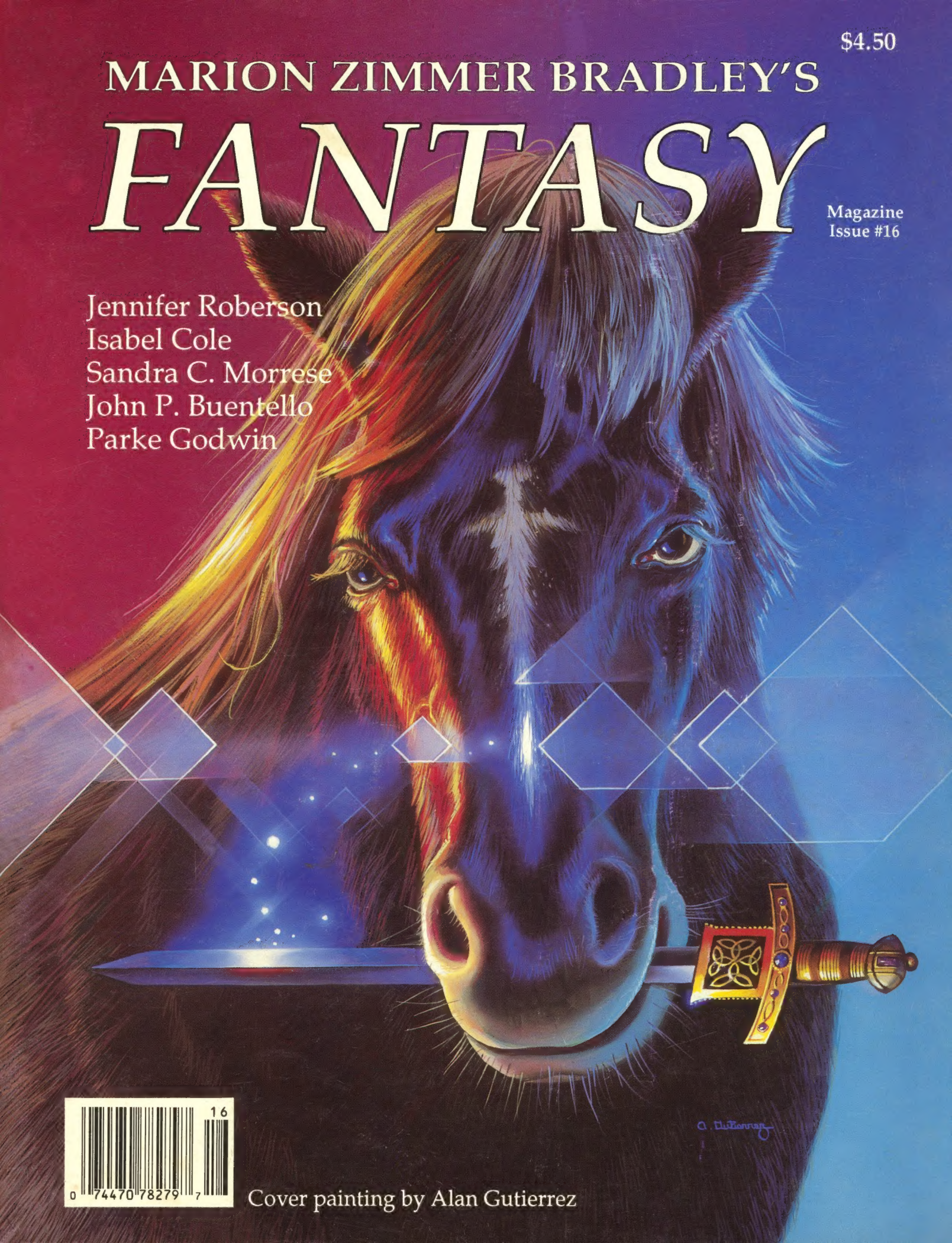

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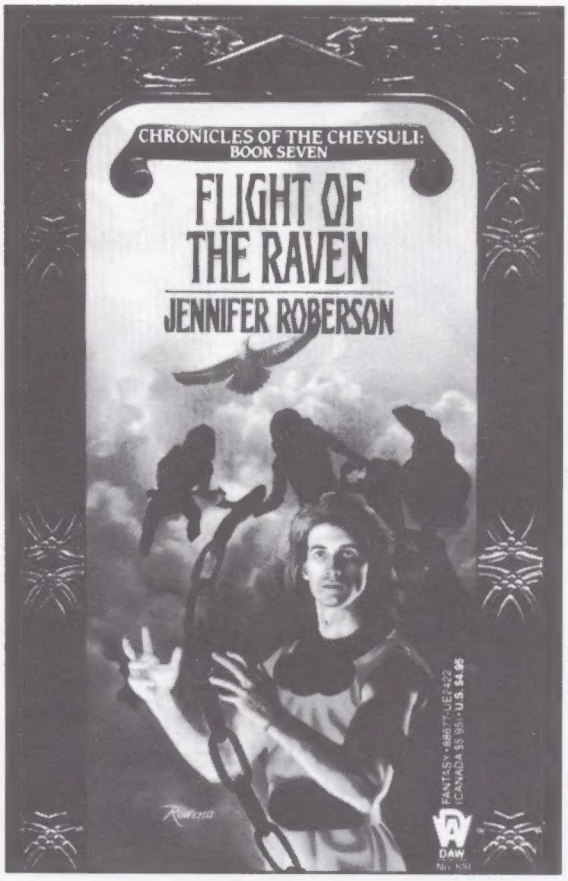
Will the heir to the Lion Throne prove the weak link that destroys the age-old Prophecy of the First born?



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Chronicles of the Cheysuli: Book Seven

FLIGHT OF THE RAVEN

Jennifer Roberson

Aidan, only child of Brennan and Aileen, and the grandson of Niall, is heir to the Lion Throne of Homana and inheritor, too, of a prophecy carried down through the generations and finally on the verge of fulfillment. But will Aidan—driven as he is by strange visions and portents—prove the weak link in the ages-old prophecy, the Cheysuli who fails to achieve his foretold destiny?

For as Aidan prepares to set out for Erinn to claim his betrothed, he will become the focus of forces out of legend, visited by the ghosts of long-dead kinsmen, and by the Hunter, a mysterious being who may be a Cheysuli god incarnate. Commanded by the Hunter to undertake a quest to claim a series of "god-given" golden links, Aidan will find himself challenged by the Cheysuli's most deadly foe, Lochiel, the son of Strahan, who will use every trick of Ihlini sorcery to stop Aidan and destroy the promise of the prophecy once and for all....

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine

Discovery

As I've often said, it's always a great pleasure to discover something purely enjoyable that's neither illegal or immoral; I think it may have been Oscar Wilde who complained — maybe it was G. Bernard Shaw — that no one should pass up any experience which was neither immoral nor degrading.

One such pleasure, known to all editors, and probably better than anything else in this category — I forget who said that everything she enjoyed was either immoral, illegal, or fattening — one such innocent and useful pleasure in this category is known to all editors: the utter delight of reading, from an otherwise undistinguished slushpile, something actually good, something he — or in this case I — can actually use.

It's a long time now, but I can still remember the delight of reading the very first of Jennifer Roberson's stories — and then, soon after, reading her first Tiger and Del story, "The Lady and the Tiger", for the second of the Sword and Sorceress volumes.

A few months ago, being in Arizona, where Jennifer lives, at a convention, I asked her to write a cover story for the magazine. Since covers — and most stories over 6,000 words — are done by arrangement, usually by someone whose work I know — which reflects just how rare it is to find something of real quality in the slush pile — so that I must ask — though that it does still happen is attested by "Black Ribbon" in number 14 — written by a writer I'd never heard of — and what a delight it was to find it there — such joys, rare as they are, keep me reading, even though most of the time all I get, like the pearl diver, is a cold wet soggy oyster that isn't even good to eat!

But when I do — there's no high like it. Sex isn't in it.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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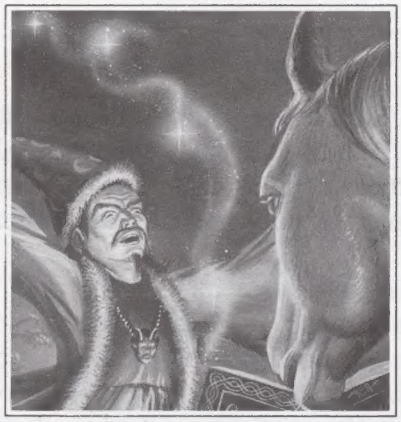

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Never Look at a Gift Sword in the Horse's Mouth

or: The Horse Who Would Be King

Jennifer Roberson

My master had a problem. He knew it. I knew it. But nobody else knew it. And we needed to keep it that way.

"You're a magician," I told him comfortingly. "Use some smoke and mirrors, a little sleight of hand, a pinch of razzle-dazzle — no one will even notice."

The morning, for Britain, was bright: the half-hearted sun was a tarnished, brass-colored splotch in the haze of reluctant day. Birds chirped. Bees buzzed. Mice rustled. Down the hill, a camp dog barked.

My master slumped disconsolately against the broken tree stump in the hollow of the hill, rump planted precariously near an anthill. The ants, as yet, were oblivious; unfortunately, so was he.

"Magician," he muttered disgustedly. "I'm bloody Merlin, you fool!" I considered polite ways of pointing out the anthill and the potential consequences of taking up residence, however temporary, in its immediate environs, but decided the topic at hand was more immediate. My master was touchily proud of his position as the most exalted, learned, and powerful magician Britain had ever known, and protected that reputation with a fervor verging on obsession... any challenges to his authority, intended or no, required delicate attention.

"I know that," I reminded him, implying mild reproof; a long and peculiar acquaintanceship allowed me great latitude in familiarity. "You've taken great pains for some years now to establish exactly who you are, with commensurate reputation. No one in all of Britain doesn't know who you are."

He cast me a baleful glance from dark, brooding eyes overshadowed with thick, untidy dark hair only infrequently combed or cut. "And there's the rub," he complained. "I'm a victim of my own success. I'm left no room for failure."

I snorted. "There's no reason you shouldn't be successful this time."

"No reason!" The baleful glare reasserted itself as affronted outrage. "I'm supposed to supply Britain with the greatest hero-king she's ever known, and you say, ever so blithely —" with the soft-spoken, icy precision that cut the legs out from lesser souls, "— there's no reason I shouldn't be successful?"

I ignored the ice and derision. "No reason at all. Trust me."

Merlin glared, surrendering verbal acrobatics; none of them worked, with me. "Trust you."

"Yes."

With elegant precision, my master said distinctly: "You are a horse."

A moot point, and unworthy of discussion. I tossed my head, flopping my dark gray forelock eloquently between upstanding ears. "I'm confident you'll find someone for the job."

Merlin ground his teeth, spitting out his commentary with a repressed passion that underscored his frustration. "It can't be just anyone, don't you see? It must be someone very special. Someone unique in all respects. Someone perfectly suited to unite all the warring tribes so Britain can fend off foreign invaders."

I looked down my nose, a posture better suited to me than to him, as my nose was considerably longer. "You just need someone who can kiss a lot of ass," I told him, "although why anyone would want an ass when there's a perfectly presentable horse available, I don't know."

"Don't be so arrogant," Merlin sniffed. "After all, I made you."

"And I'll be the making of you." I gazed back at the encampment some distance away. Smoke clogged the trees, drifting hither and yon. I heard the sounds of laughter, raillery, arguments, mock fighting, weapons practice. The air stank of smoke, burned meat, and unwashed human bodies. "We haven't failed yet. We'll come up with a plan."

Merlin heaved a sigh, picking idly at a snag in his second-best enchanter's robe. "Not just any plan. It has to be very delicate. Very selective, so there's no question as to the outcome. I can't just point at a fellow and say: 'That's the man there, don't you know, rightwise born king of all England.' "

I cocked a hoof, standing hipshot. "Why not?"

"It smacks of dictatorship. They won't like it, from me. These people like signs, and portents, and omens...they're a superstitious lot, bound up by ritualistic gobbledygook — never mind such things are as easy to arrange as buying a girl for the night." He glowered at me. "Not that I can buy one, mind you...whose idea

was it that Merlin had to be chaste?"

"You had to be something," I reminded him. "You needed a gimmick. Nobody cares if you sing, or tell stories, or swill wine with the best of them — what sets a man apart in these immoral times is his chastity."

He flapped a hand at a bee. "You might have picked something easier on me. Or at least let me geld you, so we suffer equally."

I pointedly ignored the suggestion. "As to signs and portents and ritualistic gobbledygook, you've been the one arranging those very things for years, now."

He snapped a loose thread free of his robe, inspecting it morosely. If he kept at it, part of the robe would unravel and hence become third-best. "I have to make them think they've something to do with it...or else make it so obvious there's only one conclusion."

"Tests are good for that. They weed out the inappropriate."

The line of his mouth crimped. "I hate to make the kingship of all Britain contingent upon a test."

"Why? Makes as much sense as drawing names out of a pot."

I pawed at damp turf, digging an idle hole. We all have our bad habits. "After all, it's you who'll be running the realm."

Merlin thought about it. "I need the right sort of man. A very particular type of man. Stupid enough to be malleable, but wise enough to know his limits. Young enough to be suitably idealistic, big enough to be impressive."

I plucked a succulent clot of turf from the damp ground, shook it free of mud, ground it to bits between my teeth.

"There's always Artie."

Truly taken aback, Merlin gazed at me in horror. "You can't be serious!"

"He's pretty good at carrying your baggage around, and he always feeds me on time."

"Artie's thick in the head."

"All the better for you." I smiled, displaying teeth. "He's young enough, big enough, certainly stupid enough — and he listens to you."

"Because he knows if he doesn't I'll turn him into a frog."

"No, you wouldn't. Artie's an innocent. You'd never hurt him like that."

Merlin just scowled; he hates it whenever I remind him he's not the tyrant he pretends to be.

I switched my tail. "It's a good idea, and you know it. He's been quiet since we arrived, so no one knows much about him. He looks enough like Uther to qualify as his bastard; and anyway, Uther's dead. He won't care."

Merlin grunted. "Who's his mother, then?"

I ruminated a moment. "What about that woman living out on the edge of nowhere in Cornwall? At Tintagel. She's supposed to be a trifle touched in the head, too."

"Gorlois's widow?" Dark brows lanced down. "That's Ygraine. No one's seen her for years. She lives out there with a couple of servants and a castle full of cats."

"That's what I mean. She won't put up much of a fuss. And if she does, just keep sending her merchants with wagons full of wares. Shopping will keep her mind off things."

"Uther's bastard, got on Ygraine."

Merlin chewed a lip. "It could work."

"Of course it could."

"I'll have to concoct some bizarre tale full of supposed magic and superstitious nonsense to account for the bedding."

"Uther bedded half the woman in Britain."

"But he's allergic to cats. He'd never have bedded Ygraine, or he'd have sneezed for a month."

I waggled dark-tipped ears. "You'll think of something. You've done it before." With my help, of course, but we don't always mention that.

"And something to prove Artie's worthy." Merlin chewed a ragged fingernail. Very bad habit. "That will be the hard part."

I disagreed. "Just figure out a straightforward test with all the right sort of bells and whistles, then contrive the thing so Artie passes when no one else can."

"Ants!" Merlin cried, leaping to his feet. In a frenzy of activity unbecoming to the most exalted enchanter Britain had ever known, he beat off the ants with both hands. "Begone!" he thundered.

I winced, wondering if England would keep her ants. The last time Merlin had been so irritated, we'd been in Ireland, with snakes.

Though someone else got the credit for that.

Artie came up to see me at midday. All the other horses were picketed at tents or elsewhere in the trees, but everyone had learned very quickly that the big gray horse with the sword-shaped blaze on his face was not to be bothered.

I nickered a greeting as he made his way up the hill, using horse language in case anyone else was around. Only Artie and Merlin knew I could talk, and we'd decided it was better left that way. Actually, I think it was because Merlin didn't like sharing his notoriety; a talking horse would siphon some of the attention from him.

Artie wore that distant, slack-jawed expression that others took for stupidity, including my master. In truth, Artie wasn't that stupid. He just daydreamed a lot.

I'd asked him once what he thought about when he turned himself sideways to the day and wandered the dreaming

Artwork by Alan Gutierrez

lands that separated waking life from sleep. He'd just hunched his big shoulders and answered "Things," in that infuriatingly unspecific way that said everything he needed to say, and nothing at all of what I wanted to hear.

But that's Artie, God love him.

For a man as big as Artie, he knew how to walk quietly. I heard nary a crackle of underbrush and deadfall as he climbed the hill to me. I smelled the oatcake before he dug it out of his tunic, expanding nostrils to breathe heavily at him.

"All right, all right..." Smiling widely, Artie unknotted the corner of his tunic and caught most of the crumbs before they fell. His hands were huge and gentle, cupping my muzzle tenderly as I lipped up the oatcake.

Once finished, I put one large nostril up against his face. We traded breaths a moment, reasserting our bond, and then Artie patted me firmly on one shoulder, smacking palm audibly.

"More swordplay today," he told me. "Kay will have his turn."

"What about you?" I asked.

Artie shook his head, hitching one shoulder. "Not for me."

"Why not? Ector'd let you."

"Kay would complain."

"Let him. Merlin paid enough coin for your fosterage — let it buy you a chance, too."

But Artie just shrugged again. "Doesn't matter."

I eyed him thoughtfully. "They've been at you again, haven't they?"

Another shrug as he stroked the underside of my jaw.

"You're big enough to beat them all at their own game, Artie."

"That's what they want me to do."

"So, you'll let them call you names without trying to make them stop."

"They'll say whatever they want, anyway."

"If you learned some of the skills — "

"No." Wrinkles marred his forehead beneath the lank light-brown hair. "I'm good at what I do. I don't need to be like them."

"You could be better than them."

Artie just shook his head.

I rested my chin on his shoulder and leaned. "There's more to life than fetching and carrying for Merlin."

He laughed. "I could say the same to you."

"But I'm a horse, Artie. That's what horses do."

"And I'm just Artie. It's good enough for me."

I snorted damply at him. He just wiped his face clean and cast me a reproachful glance.

The trouble with people like Artie is you can never reason with them. Especially when they're right.

Merlin, hunched over his grimoire, looked up crossly as I stuck my head inside the flaps of his tent. His expression cleared as he saw me. "What is it?"

"Have you made any progress on your plans for Artie's test?"

He scowled. He had changed from his second-best robe to his third-best, which meant he'd probably unravelled enough of his second-best to make it the new third-best, thereby elevating the former third to second.

"No," he said shortly.

"I think I may have the answer."

"Oh?" He shut the grimoire and placed it back on its tripod, rising to stand before me. "Pray tell me, horse, what Britain's greatest magician can do to deliver a king?"

"I told you. There's Artie —"

Merlin made a rude sound. "It's a stupid idea."

"Why? Would you rather have someone like Kay make a play for the realm?"

Merlin snorted. "Kay's a hotheaded, braying fool."

"While Artie's a kind man who wants the best for everyone."

"Kind men don't make good kings."

"With your attitude, you could make up the difference."

We glared at one another. Merlin broke it off. "All right, enough already. What do you suggest?"

"This," I said, and told him.

The night was cool, crisp, very dark, save for the spill of argent moonlight glinting through leaves and branches. Merlin slid off my back, muttering under his breath of foolish ideas and superstitious nonsense. The grimoire, wrapped in pure black silk, was tucked under an arm; he hitched it more securely between elbow and hip, and stalked ahead of me through the darkness.

"Over there," I told him. "On the other side of that tree."

He went around the designated tree and stopped at the huddled rock formation. Not large, not small; kind of medium, worn smooth by time and dampness. "This?"

"That." I plodded onward and stopped beside him. "Appropriately unique, wouldn't you say?"

"It's a rock."

"Not just a rock. The rock. Have you no imagination?"

Merlin grunted. "I suppose it will do."

"It had better, if you're to maintain your reputation." I ignored the sideways scowl. "You said there was a spell for what we need."

"Oh, I can melt the rock with no real difficulty, and even fuse it back. I just don't understand why I should."

"Leave that to me."

Merlin stared at me fixedly. "Look here," he said finally, "you've given me a lot of good ideas over the years, but you can't deny the fact you're a horse. How do I know this trick of yours will work?"

"It won't cost either of us anything to find out."

Merlin heaved a sigh. "You're being obtuse, as always."

I reached out a forehoof and banged it off the rock. "If it's to be done by dawn, we'd better get busy."

"All this just for Artie."

"All this just for England — and your reputation."

Merlin sat down, opened the grimoire and began to page through it.

"Here," he rasped at last. "This one should do it."

It was nearly dawn. I blinked myself awake, peered blurrily at the rock, then blew out a blade of grass that had lodged itself in one nostril as I'd grazed earlier. "Now for the sword," I murmured.

Merlin was alarmed. "Sword? What sword? You said nothing about a sword. I didn't bring one with me."

"That's my part," I told him. "All right. Close your eyes. Sit very still. Don't move until I say so."

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

"I'm sure it won't work if you don't do as I tell you."

Merlin gritted his teeth. Closed his eyes. Sat very still.

"No peeking," I warned. "This is very delicate magic."

"I'm the magician," he muttered. "I know a little about such things."

"Shhhh."

Merlin held his tongue.

It wasn't so bad, after all: just a small piece of myself, made over into something else. My head ached a little, and my knees were a bit wobbly, but in the end the task was accomplished with little fanfare. I bent, put my head down close to his lap, and let the sword fall.

"Now," I told Merlin.

He caught it, clasped it, gazed in awe upon it. "A sword," he whispered. Hands caressed the weapon, wary of the blade. "A sword," he said again.

I saw the acquisitive glint in dark eyes. "Artie's sword," I told him.

"Artie's..." He looked up at me. From his posture on the ground, I loomed over him.

"Artie's," I said pointedly. "Now it's your turn."

"My turn?"

I thrust my nose toward the rock. "Melt it. Put the blade in it, with the hilt left standing upright. Fuse the stone back."

Merlin was aghast. "You want me to seal it up?"

"For now."

"What good is it, then? How will it ever be used?"

"It will be used to determine a king."

Merlin made an inelegant sound in the back of his throat. "That'll be the day."

"Tomorrow," I said. Then, reconsidering, "Sometime today, that is."

"This is the most ridiculous thing I ever heard — "

"Just do it," I told him. "There's a lot riding on this."

Merlin sighed and set the grimoire aside, heaving himself up with the sword clasped in both hands. He strode to the stone, shut his eyes, held the sword above his head, and hissed the incantation.

The air crackled and turned blue. All the hair on my body rose. Stone parted, then flowed aside. It swallowed the naked blade as Merlin thrust it downward. Then it flowed back, cradling the blade, and remained completely liquefied until Merlin spoke once more. A single, sibilant word made it stone again. The blue light went away. The crackle died out.

"There," he rasped hoarsely. "Stuck in the rock, forever."

Splay-legged, I shook my entire body as violently as I could to rid myself of the itch left by all the magic. "Give it a few hours." He scooped up the grimoire, wrapped it in silk again, gazed wearily at me out of bloodshot eyes. "This will determine a king?

"Signs and portents," I told him. "Ritualistic gobbledygook. But I think it will do the trick."

"What do we do next?"

"You wake everybody up at dawn and parade them up here. Tell them it's been revealed to you that Whosoever Pulleth This Sword From The Stone Shall Be Rightwise Born King Of All England."

"What?" Merlin croaked.

"Trust me," I told him.

Merlin, being Merlin, enticed everyone to the rock by dawn, promising them who knows what in the elegant, eloquent pomposity of language that impresses those mere mortals who can't decipher it.

Artie, being Artie, meandered up through morning mist and stopped next to me, rooting through his tunic for an oatcake.

"Go down with the others," I murmured from the side of my mouth, pitching my voice so no one else could hear.

"What for?" Artie untied knots.

"Just do what I say. Listen to Merlin."

Artie squinted through the dawn haze and listened briefly as Merlin harangued the gathering. "He's just going on again," Artie said finally. "He does that sometimes."

"You're supposed to be down there with the others."

"Here." He held out a crumbled oatcake.

I shoved his hand aside, knocking the cake to the ground in a shower of crumbs. "I don't want the bloody thing! Just go down with the others and take your turn!"

"My turn?" Artie, squatting to gather up the largest of the crumbs, peered up at me. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Have a shot at the sword," I told him.

"What sword — ? — oh, that sword." He straightened, frowning. "How did that get there?"

"Magic," I hissed. "Go get in line, will you?"

Artie stared at the sword thrusting boldly upright in the stone. "Seems to me if someone went to all the trouble to put that sword in the rock, we ought to leave it there."

I tucked my nose into the small of his back and shoved him down the hill. He staggered a few steps, caught his balance, looked aggrievedly back at me. I glared at him ominously.

Merlin, seeing this, cut off his exhortation. He motioned curtly at Artie. "Get in line. Get in line. Everyone has his chance."

Kay's voice rose above the murmurs. "Come on, Artie! Afraid to fail in front of everybody?"

I scowled down at him. Artie just shrugged his shoulders, scratching at lank brown hair.

It took a while, as expected. Each man had his pull, then stepped aside, muttering, and waited with the others to watch the next attempt. So far, all had failed. I nodded across at Merlin, who orchestrated the trial. But it wasn't until I saw the wild glint in his eyes that I realized Artie was missing.

I trotted over to Merlin. "Where is he?" I hissed.

"I thought you were with him!" Merlin waved his hands in an approximation of a spell, just to keep the crowd distracted.

"I sent him down to stand in line."

"This is the end of the line. Artie isn't in it."

Trust Artie — never mind. "I'll find him," I said grimly. "Just send everyone back to bashing at one another to find out who's the best swordsman."

"I just went through this whole rigmarole about finding the Rightwise-Born-King-Of-All-England," Merlin growled. "What do I tell them now?"

I swung away from him. "You'll think of something. I've got to look for Artie."

Eventually, Artie found me. In a black mood I grazed the hilltop near the sword in the stone, tearing up clumps of turf. I wasn't really hungry, but it was something to do.

"I need a sword," he said.

I lifted my head and glared at him. "Where have you been?"

He hitched slabbed shoulders. "I went for a walk."

"You were supposed to try to pull the sword from the stone, like everybody else."

He toed a stone out of its bed. "I didn't feel like it."

"But now you need a sword."

"Not that one. One for Kay. He broke his."

I reached out and grabbed a hunk of tunic with my teeth, then dragged him ungently over to the rock. "Try this one, Artie."

"It's in a rock. I can't."

"Trust me," I suggested. "Kay won't mind."

Artie heaved a sigh and wrapped one big hand around the grip. He tugged.

Nothing happened.

"Try both hands," I said.

Artie did. Nothing happened. "See?" he said. "It's supposed to stay in the rock."

Alarums sounded. "No, no. Try again. Harder, this time."

He did. Then gave it up as a bad job. "I'll go see if I can borrow a sword for Kay."

"Wait — " I grabbed the back of his tunic. "Humor me, will you? Look...you just grab it and pull — " I locked my teeth around the hilt and dragged the thing

from the stone.

Artie just blinked at me.

"Take it." My words were warped by the grip in my mouth. "Take the thing, will you?"

Obligingly, Artie took the sword.

"Quick like a bunny," I told him, "run down the hill to Merlin and show him what you've got."

"But — Kay needs it."

"Don't give it to Kay. Take it to Merlin."

"Why?"

I leaned my chin on his shoulder. "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

Artie, being Artie, didn't argue with the obvious.

Smugly, I waited on the hilltop for Merlin's Voice of Pronouncement to roll throughout the forest, setting leaves and saplings to shaking. But I didn't hear anything at all out of Merlin until he came racing up the hill, stumbling over rocks. Mostly, he just panted.

"What did you do?" he demanded. "By God, I ought to sell you off to Welsh archers. They shoot horses, don't they?"

"Now, now," I said mildly, "things can't be that bad. Did Artie bring you the sword?"

"He wandered by with a sword, said something about Kay, then wandered off again. By the time I figured out just exactly what sword he had — I never did see it — he'd given the thing to Kay!"

"Oh, God. And now Kay's — ?"

"— spouting off to everyone with ears that he's Rightwise-Born-King-Of-All-England," Merlin finished, panting a little. "Couldn't you have come up with a shorter title?"

My mind raced. "But you didn't announce it, did you? As Merlin?"

"Not officially, no. I haven't said anything."

Relief bubbled. "Then we're safe."

Merlin's expression was crazed. "How can we be safe, blast you? Kay's got the bloody thing, and Artie's out looking for baby rabbits."

"Out looking — ? Never mind." I thought a moment. "Go get it back."

"Get what back — the sword? On what pretext?"

"Tell Kay he's got to draw the sword from the stone again. That it doesn't count unless everyone witnesses it. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Oh, God," he muttered. "Why do I ever let you get me into these things?"

"Just go round up Kay and everyone else and take them to the stone. I'll see if I can flush Artie."

"You didn't have much luck last time."

"Kay," I said firmly.

Gnashing his teeth, Merlin dragged up the trailing hem of his third-best — no, his second-best — robe and went back down the hill.

"Rabbits," I murmured thoughtfully, and went off in the other direction.

I found Artie sprawled face-down in front of a burrow. His expression was rapt. "You gave him the sword," I said.

Artie jumped, rolling to his side, then clapped a hand to his heart. "You scared me to death!"

"I'll do more than that if you don't get your rump up from the ground and come with me back to the stone."

Artie got up slowly, picking grass and leaves from hair and clothing. "Kay needed it."

"I told you to take it to Merlin."

"I did."

"You took it near Merlin. There's a difference."

Artwork by Alan Gutierrez

"He would have used his Voice of Pronouncement. It hurts my head when he does that."

"It's supposed to. It's so you'll realize what he's saying is something important."

On cue, Merlin's bellow worked its way through the trees. Artie winced. "See?"

I nudged his shoulder. "You'll have time for rabbits later. Right now there's work to be done."

By the time I got Artie back to the stone, Merlin was looking a little frazzled. He saw us coming, stopped waving his arms, and glared balefully at Artie. Kay, I saw, stood in a belligerent posture at the front of the crowd. The sword hung from one hand.

I dropped my head down to Artie's shoulder, leaning weight into it. "Promise me one thing," I said. "Try the sword, this time."

"I tried before. It didn't work."

"Artie — please. If you love me, give it a try."

Artie stopped short, swung on his heels, slung both arms around my neck. "But of course I love you!"

The watching crowd snickered. Kay said something snide, but I couldn't quite catch it.

"All right," I hissed, "that's enough. Don't make a scene — yet."

Artie disentangled his arms from neck and mane. His eyes were suspiciously bright, and his cheeks were damp.

A soft-hearted fool, our Artie.

"Go stand with the others," I murmured.

Obligingly, Artie went off to stand at the edge of the throng. As usual, people made comments.

Merlin turned back and thrust his arms into the air. The Voice of Pronouncement bellowed forth once more. "So there can be no doubt as to who shall rule Britain, I pledge to you that Whosoever Pulleth This Sword From The Stone Shall Rightwise Be Born King Of All England!"

A voice from the back of the crowd: "We did this once, already."

Merlin glared at them all. "Do it AGAIN!"

Kay didn't move.

Merlin scowled at him. "Put the sword back."

He didn't so much as twitch.

"Put the sword back."

Kay's eyes narrowed. "Make me."

A single massive indrawn breath nearly sucked the leaves from the trees. Expectancy abounded.

Merlin took two steps to Kay. He leaned forward slightly. No one dared to breathe.

Very softly, Merlin said: "Put. The sword. BACK."

Everyone on the hillside clapped hands over ears as the final word crashed through the forest. Trees fell. Lightning flashed. Camp dogs barked, while picketed horses squealed.

I, of course, didn't, though I had to unpin my ears with effort.

Somewhat hurriedly, Kay went over and stuffed the blade back into the rock. But his intransigence remained firm. "I get first crack."

"Fine," Merlin gritted. "First Kay, then everyone else."

He stabbed a look at Artie. "You too, this time!"

Artie nodded glumly.

England's greatest magician waved impatient hands. "All right. Let's get going. We don't have all day."

Kay tried, and failed. Three times, in all, grunting and straining, sweat running from his red face. Then two of his friends caught him by either elbow and pulled him bodily away.

"Next!" Merlin called.

Everyone had a try. Lastly came Artie.

"It won't work," he muttered to us. "I tried this already."

Merlin stuck his face into Artie's. "Just DO it!"

Sighing, Artie wrapped both hands around the grip and yanked.

Nothing happened.

"Oh God," Merlin breathed. "I'm ruined. I'm finished. It's over. It's done with. Finis — "

"Shut up," I hissed. "He's not done yet."

But he was. Artie tried twice more. The sword didn't budge.

"Keep your hands on the grip," I said quickly. Then, to Merlin: "Your Voice of Pronouncement! Now!"

"What am I supposed to Pronounce?"

"And make some fog. Hurry!"

"Hell, fog's easy."

It was. Almost instantly, the forest was choking in fog.

"Hey!" someone called. "What's all this, then?"

I shut my teeth on the grip and dragged the sword yet again out of the stone. "Here," I mumbled to Artie. "Hold the blasted thing."

"Again?" he asked wonderingly.

"The Voice!" I hissed at Merlin. "Britain has a king!"

Merlin began Pronouncing.

"For God's sake," I said desperately, "make the fog disappear! No one can see anything!"

In mid-syllable the fog winked out, leaving Merlin Pronouncing enthusiastically, me blinking owl-eyed, and Artie — dear, sweet Artie — clutching the sword.

"Whosoever-Pulleth-This-Sword-From-The-Stone — "

"Here," someone said, "I didn't see anything!"

" — Is-Rightwise-Born-King — "

"Not Artie!" Kay shouted. "My God, not ARTIE!"

" — Of-All-England!" Merlin finished. "The End."

"Not yet," I said aggrievedly.

"For me, it is," he rasped. "I need a drink."

"Artie didn't do it!" Kay shouted. "It wasn't Artie at all! I was standing right here — I saw — " He dragged in a wheezing breath. "Merlin's HORSE did it!"

Heavy silence ensued. And Kay, who is not entirely a fool, realized what he'd said, what it sounded like, and what it might do for his future.

I selected that moment to bestow upon the earth my undeniably horsey essence in a noisy, lengthy stream.

Glumly Kay looked at Artie. "Long live the king."

Very quietly.

As I knew he would, Artie came up to see me later. I stood hipshot in the moonlight, whuffling a greeting. I smelled oatcakes.

Artie untied a knot and held it out. I lipped it up gingerly. "Where's the sword?" I asked, once I'd finished the cake.

"Merlin's got it. He says he doesn't trust me with it yet. He says I'd probably give it to Kay, or somebody equally unsuitable."

"Well, you did once."

"But don't you see? I'm not suitable, either!"

"The sword says you are."

"That sword says nothing at all! You pulled it out!"

I didn't answer at once.

Artie nodded firmly. "Twice, you pulled it out."

"Yes, well...you can't very well expect a horse to be King-of-All-England."

"You can't expect me to be, either!"

"Too late, Artie. Merlin's done his Pronouncing."

"But I can't be Whosoever-Pulleth," he insisted. "It wouldn't be right."

"Rightwise," I murmured. "And Artie

—it doesn't really matter that much. This is how things are done."

"What things?"

"Important things. They happen the way people make them happen, and then other people sing songs and tell stories and write about them the way they wished they'd happened." I twitched a shoulder. "It's just the way life is."

"I never wanted to be king."

"Maybe that's why you'll be a good one."

"Will I?" He brightened. "Are you sure?"

"Leave it to Merlin. He'll see it comes out all right."

Artie hooked an arm over my withers. "You're the finest horse I've ever known."

"Thank you."

"I'd like to do something for you. Something grand and wise and kingly, so no one will ever forget you."

"They'll forget me, Artie. I'm only a horse, after all."

Artie looked worried. "But you're sort of the glue that holds us all together!"

I winced. "Let's not mention glue, shall we?"

"All right." He brightened. "I'll name my firstborn son after you!"

I snorted. "After a horse? That's not very kingly — and the son might object, once he's old enough."

"But I have to do something."

It wasn't worth arguing over. Besides, it would hurt nothing. Part of me was already on permanent loan. "Do as you will, then," I said. "It's Excalibur."

"Your name?"

"Yes."

Artie grinned. "I'll see you're never forgotten! I'll see to it the name lives on forever and ever!"

"Artie ..." But I let it go. "Thanks, Artie. I appreciate it."

He hugged my neck tightly. "Excalibur," he whispered. "A good name for a horse."

"Go to bed," I suggested. "You've got a full day ahead tomorrow."

"I suppose." He slapped me in farewell. "I'll bring you an oatcake in the morning."

He meant it, I knew. I also knew he'd already fed me the last of the oatcakes. "Go on," I said, and nudged him very gently.

Waving goodnight, Artie went back to the camp.

"All right," I said. "You can come out now."

He came, drifting out of the darkness like a nightwraith. "So," he said. "Excalibur, is it?"

"Yes."

Faint accusation: "You never told me."

"True Names contain magic. You know better than that."

"But Artie intends to let everyone know it. It won't be you, anymore."

I twitched an ear. "It doesn't matter, now. I have no part in the story. Let him use it as he will."

Merlin stroked my nose. "We've made England a king, old friend."

"Artie will do fine."

Fingers drifted up beneath the forelock, then brushed it aside. The dark eyes so full of magic were bright in the moonlight as he studied my forehead. "So that's where it came from."

I twitched a shoulder dismissively.

"Powerful magic, that. More than I'd risk."

I shook the forelock back into place. "Doesn't matter, does it? It's over and done with."

"I suppose so." He patted me on the shoulder. "A good plan, old friend. Most assuredly, my reputation will survive."

"And your name." I swished my tail. "Artie — and England — will need you."

"And Excalibur." Which was no longer me.

Another pat, and then Merlin, who knew, was gone. I shook my head again, aware of a vague tingle in the place beneath my forelock where the sword-shaped blaze had been.

I gazed up at the waning moon. "A kingdom for a horse?"

No. I rephrased it.

❧

Jennifer Roberson lives in Tempe, Arizona, with her dogs, a Labrador Retriever and a Cardigan Welsh Corgi, which she shows in the breed and obedience rings. "The dogs give me a nice break from writing, which keeps my head on straight," she writes. She has published eleven fantasy novels via DAW Books: seven of the eight volumes in her Chronicles of the Cheysuli, and all four in her Sword-Dancer saga. The final Cheysuli novel, **A TAPESTRY OF LIONS**, is due December 1992. Two months prior, in September, Zebra Books will publish **LADY OF THE FOREST**, her first mainstream hardcover, a historical novel delineating the birth of the Robin Hood legend. "Sort of a prequel, I guess...really a rite of passage novel for Marian, Robin, and all the classic characters."

Alan Gutierrez did this issue's cover as well as the artwork for this story. He lives in Sedona, Arizona, with his wife and daughter. Recently, as Guest Artist of Honor at NorWesCon, Alan selected a piece published here last issue for the cover of the Pocket Program.

Be wise...

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Artwork by James Balkovek

Yula of Hansborg Castle and the Spy

by Michael Thomas Dillon

At the crest of the hill Yula stopped, and her heart quickened in excitement. Below her the road disappeared into the dark, dense forest of the lowlands, but on the far side of this, tall and misted by distance, rose the lofty turrets of Lightstead Castle. It was here she had traveled a day and night to reach, so as to deliver the Luminous Amulet into the hands of the Council of Good Measure.

Yula's apprehensions fled at the sight of these pristine towers, knowing the way was now so short and her journey near its end. But she did not allow them to flee far, as those who wished the amulet not to reach its destination were powerful and cunning. Yet the wooded lowlands below her, beshadowed and ominous of appearance as they may have been, were protected by the magic of the Council's wizards. She could not imagine the Dark Force challenging this magic, even to stop delivery of the Luminous Amulet, for none from the Shadowrealm can bear the sight of Lightstead.

As a child Yula had heard tales of Dark warriors and wizards forced to look upon the turrets of Lightstead by the Council of Good Measure, and it was said that, as their bodies slumped dead to the ground, their black souls flew shrieking from them aflame with the power of light. Whether there was any truth to these tales, Yula had no way of knowing, but she suspected that they held some measure of truth.

She felt the hardness of the amulet through the leather pouch tied at her belt, and marveled for the hundredth time at the fact that she was chosen as its courier: Yula, a lowly guard of the gate at Hansborg Castle, the bearer of such an important and powerful cargo. But she did not fool herself and think that she was special for any other reason beyond being chosen, as she knew full well that it was an honor but one bestowed upon her because of the very fact of her low rank. Yet it was indeed something to be proud of, and if she managed to deliver the amulet safely to Lightstead Castle, it would surely help her career mightily.

So with these thoughts to inspire her and the far turrets to

guide her way, Yula descended into the lowlands' brooding forest.

The navigation of the forest went quickly and without incident, and as Yula neared the gates of Lightstead Castle, she felt confident that she had succeeded. It was not until Yula happened to hear a sound from behind, that she turned and saw the old, blind man. He wore a fold of cloth around his head that was tied at the back, covering his eyes so others would not have to look upon them.

He was but five paces from her, and Yula wondered how it was that she had not detected his presence earlier. But she recognized the fellow from previous visits to Lightstead, and seeing no threat, turned to continue on her way.

"A moment, my lady," the old man said, raising his cane to signal the urgency of the matter. "I am old and tired, and would ask for an arm to lean on, if you might be so kind."

Yula hesitated, frowning, but shortly took the old man by the arm and led him to the gate of the outer wall that surrounded the great castle. She relinquished her sword to the guards of the gate, as no one entered the castle commons armed, and guided the old man inside. As they were passing in front of the castle itself, the old man thanked Yula for her kindness and turned to be on his way.

"Hold, sir," Yula demanded, grabbing the old man's shoulder, her other hand on the empty pouch at her belt.

Turning back, the old fellow looked surprised and a little frightened.

Yula squared off in front of him, set her feet wide apart. "I'll have back what you've taken from me, prestidigitator!"

"I've taken nothing," the old man retorted, but the fear and guilt was plain on his face.

"Then you won't mind removing the cloth from your eyes for me," Yula said, recalling the childhood tales.

The old man cried out in terror at her request, flailing his cane before him frantically. Yula easily side-stepped the cane and yanked the fold away from behind. Caught off guard, the old man had no time to shut his eyes against Lightstead, which reared up directly in front of him, turrets shimmering in the sunlight.

Common folk, who had gathered around to watch the confrontation, stared in awe-struck wonder as the old man, now wearing the robe of a Dark wizard, fell to the ground dead. Something like a shadow rose from the body in screams and blazes, and vanished in a puff of black smoke.

And all knew the old tales to be true.

When it was all over, Yula knelt at the side of the dead wizard, removing the Luminous Amulet from a pocket hidden within his black robes.

Back at Hansborg Castle, amid laughter and cheers celebrating her promotion, Yula explained how she knew the old man had been a spy.

"His first mistake," Yula began, "was when he addressed me as, 'my lady', as I had not yet spoken to give my gender away. This was something that he should not have known, being blind. But until he filched the amulet, I was not certain that he had been sent by the Dark Force. After this, there was no question."

"But how could you be sure that he was not blind?" one of Yula's comrades asked.

"I did not know," Yula replied, smiling, "but I knew there was one sure way to find out!"

All laughed at this and saluted Yula with raised tankards of ale.

❧

MICHAEL THOMAS DILLON shares his home in the northeastern corner of Massachusetts with his wife and son, a lizard named Mickey, a fish named Missy, and a funny-looking cat he calls Funky Monkey. The writer that has influenced him most in the field of fantasy is Fritz Leiber.

JAMES BALKOVEK is one of *FANTASY Magazine*'s most popular artists. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Artwork by James Balkovek

Interview: Lois McMaster Bujold

by Susan Shwartz

Lois McMaster Bujold's first novel, **SHARDS OF HONOR**, was released in 1986 and was followed that same year by two others, **THE WARRIOR'S APPRENTICE** and **ETHAN OF ATHOS**, making her, as she says, "an overnight success after a mere thirty or so years of build-up."

Her novel **FALLING FREE** was a 1988 Hugo nominee and a 1988 Nebula Award winner. Her story "The Mountains of Mourning" won the Hugo and the Nebula awards for Best Novella of 1989. Her novella "Weatherman" was a Nebula nominee in 1990, and her novel **THE VOR GAME** won the Hugo in 1990. Her most recently published novel is **BARRAYAR**.

Her next novel, a fantasy titled **THE SPIRIT RING**, marks a complete change of pace.

How did you prepare to be a writer — and what experiences in your life do you think headed you toward it?

I've been a voracious reader all my life, beginning with a passion for horse stories in grade school. I began reading adult science fiction when I was nine, a taste picked up from my father, a professor of Welding Engineering at Ohio State University and an old Cal Tech man. My reading tastes later expanded to include history, mysteries, romance, travel, war, poetry, etc. My early writing efforts began in junior high school. By eighth grade, I was putting out fragmentary imitations of my favorite writers. Somewhere in my attic still lurk 30 or so pages of an aborted epic in Spenserian verse, the result of having read both **THE FAERIE QUEEN** and Tolkien's **THE LORD OF THE RINGS** twice in the same year. My best friend Lillian Stewart (later Lillian Stewart Carl) and I collaborated on extended story lines throughout high school.

I dabbled with English as a major in college, but fell away from it quickly. My heart was in the creative, not the critical end of things. An interest in wildlife and close-up photography led me on a six-week study tour to East Africa. Later I borrowed the landscape and ecology I had seen for background of my first novel. That's one of the nicest things about writing: all of a sudden, nothing is wasted. Unemployed with two small children on a very straitened budget in Marion, Ohio, I wrote a novelette for practice and then embarked on my first novel in December of 1982. I quickly discovered that writing was far too demanding and draining to justify as a hobby, and that only serious professional recognition would satisfy me.

Daydreaming is not normally considered part of the curriculum to prepare one for Life's Economic Struggles. I can still remember my mother commenting something to the effect that if I didn't get out of bed and stop reading those silly science fiction books, I'd never get anywhere. Now I sit in bed and WRITE silly science fiction books. Heh, heh. And it's taking me all over the country and around the world. So in addition to the taking in and digesting of enormous amounts of fiction and information and experiences of all kinds, I suppose the other necessary ingredient was the time and silence to daydream, and to get good at daydreaming.

Also, I suppose we must blame my third grade teacher, Miss Shade. She handed out pictures cut from magazines one day for us to choose and write a story based on the picture. The one I chose, from God-knows-what original source, was a colorful painting of a man clinging to a floating log swirling down a flooded stream with a snarling cougar clinging to the other end. Action-adventure obviously appealed to me even then. I can still remember the story I wrote — the good guy was a cowboy-type who had as friends a talking horse and a talking cougar. The bad guy attacked them, and the hero was saved by his animals. It ran three pages, as I recall, of painful script. Must have been quite action-packed.

I'm not sure you can "prepare" to be a writer. It seems to be a career best approached crabwise. Writing is a discipline, a structure, not a content. Life is the content, and before you can write a life, you must first have one. You have to have lived long enough to have grown or found your own center, so you can write from it. (People grow their centers at vastly different rates, of course, depending on the chances of their lives.)

What made you choose to write science fiction?

I think it was imprinting. I discovered sf while still in grade school because my Dad used to buy the magazines and paperbacks to read on the plane on consulting trips, so the stuff was lying around. I also remember reading **THE VISIT TO THE**

MUSHROOM PLANET and **RETURN TO THE MUSHROOM PLANET** back in grade school, several times. I also read Heinlein juveniles: **HAVE SPACE SUIT, WILL TRAVEL** and **THE STAR BEAST** and **STARMAN JONES** — great stuff. Anyway, between age nine and age twenty-one I read all the sf I could get my hands on.

In my twenties, I mostly read other things. When I was working at a pharmacy technician at OSU Hospitals, I had a staff card admitting me to OSU's main stacks, with 2 million volumes of *everything*. Too, I suppose I had some dim notion at the time of "putting away childish things" — the silly things like sf and the absurd idea that I could be a writer. It was time to get down to serious adult activities like getting married and starting a family and trying to grow myself up. Yet in the middle of this period, for no apparent reason, I popped a 60-page Sherlock Holmes pastiche. I suppose it was the writer inside trying to get out, chipping at the shell.

Anyway, when I sat down to write seriously at age 33, the stories that fell out of my head were science fiction. I just liked it best. Rationalizing, I suppose I could say that sf has everything all other genres have, plus more — it contains romance, mystery, history, great themes, humor, anything you want. It hardly seems appealing to switch to a genre where I can only do LESS.

Why are you now working on a fantasy novel?

THE SPIRIT RING started with a book — three books, really. The first came down through the family from my mother's side. It was a scholarly monograph published in 1907 titled **THE GRATEFUL DEAD: THE HISTORY OF A FOLK STORY**, by my great-uncle Gordon Hall Gerould, B.Litt. (Oxon.), Preceptor in English in Princeton University. In 174 densely written pages, it traces the history through about 20 centuries and 20 cultures of a folk tale, the fast-forward version of which goes: Young man goes out to seek his fortune. He comes across an altercation in which the body of a debtor lies unburied until his debts are paid. Our Hero forks over his grubstake and gets the guy planted and goes on down the road to further adventures, in the course of which he finds himself supernaturally aided by the ghost of the dead man, in reward for his pious deed. So anyway, studding this monograph were these little dried raisins of stories, just calling out to have the blood pumped back into them.

Photograph by Jay Kay Klein

Enter two more books, **THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENVENUTO CELLINI** and **DE RE METALLICA** by Agricola, a sixteenth-century treatise on mining and metallurgy, inherited from my father's bookshelf. Cellini is such a wonderful egotistical monster, I could think of no better role for him than the corpse. Agricola inspired my book's hero, a self-effacing Swiss miner. The princess of the folk-tale became the magician-goldsmith's daughter, and the book was off and running.

So that's where **THE SPIRIT RING** came from, seven or eight years in the gestation, waiting its turn. It's been a wonderful change of pace, particularly when I decided to make it quasi-historical, allowing me to read a lot of wonderful nonfiction and call it "research". I expect **THE SPIRIT RING** to be a one-volume novel (strange concept), but who knows?

Do you find it different to write fantasy than science fiction? If you do, what do you think the differences are?

I find very little difference between writing fantasy and sf. The mechanics — chapter structure, scene flow, viewpoint control, etc., are identical. Because I chose to make **THE SPIRIT RING** an historical (of sorts), I've done ten times the research on it than for my hardest hard sf novel (**FALLING FREE**). That's been a change of pace — looking things up instead of making them up. Seems almost like cheating, somehow. Lots of f&sf readers are historically literate. I suspect they'll be just like the hard sf readers who write me and cheerfully point out every little error I make in my science or hole in my background. I love fans. They care almost as much about my books as I do. Or at least they are entertainingly contentious and like showing off and sharing their (in the aggregate) awesome knowledge.

In terms of FALLING FREE, how did you do the engineering research for it? Same thing for the Vorkosigan novels: how did you acquire the military background to create such an authoritative tone?

FALLING FREE's engineering bits were chosen in part because it was information I already had ready to hand. My father was a professor of welding and nondestructive testing engineering at Ohio State University, so all during my youth I waded through journals and dinner-table conversations and the occasional speeches on the topic. I knew *exactly* what welding engineers were like. Leo Graf is based in part on my father, particularly in his teaching aspects and his personal integrity. So, since I was seeing one of the world's foremost authorities on the subject practically every weekend when I took the kids to Grandma and Grandpa's, my research and expert-review problems seemed solved. Unfortunately, my father died of a longstanding heart condition when the book was only up to Chapter Six. I was thrown on other resources.

As it happened, my brother Jim had graduated in welding engineering. He was helpful in review, and he put me in touch with another engineer, Wally Voreck, a former NASA man and long-time sf reader, who gave me all the wonderful information about the ice die.

As far as the military aspects of the Vorkosigan novels go, well, I didn't read only sf all through high school. I was very interested in the life of T.E. Lawrence, so I read up on him, only lately becoming aware he was one of the seminal military theoreticians of this century; and I was very interested in WWII for a time. Most of the Vorkosigan books draw on this military background already in place; but for **THE VOR GAME**, I did a bit more research, reading Sun Tzu, John Keegan, and B.H. Liddell-Hart (whose book **STRATEGY** was slyly sent to me by Jim Baen in hopes of just such an effect, I'm sure). I was also in correspondence with one of those contentious fans I mentioned earlier and who numbers among the book's dedicatees —

William Melgaard. He is a senior naval architect, military history buff, and wargamer, and his comments were most useful. Another military history buff from Toronto, David Hughes, provided useful comment from time to time. I'm also on the lookout for personal anecdotes, war stories from individuals, including my husband, who really were there.

I get a surprising number of fan letters from serving military people, thanking me for "getting it right", for representing their viewpoint, and asking if I've been in the military. I haven't, though I'm flattered they ask. (I was equally flattered when the first question Stan Schmidt asked me, when he called to say *Analog* would buy **FALLING FREE** for serialization, was if I were an engineer.) I suppose it comes from my premise that military folk are just people, who happen to be wearing these clothes and doing this job. Writers who make their soldier-characters no more than the ROLE of soldier go astray here, I think.

How would you explain the critical and popular appeal of your work? Are you surprised at it?

I'm not sure. I do the best I can, though that best sometimes unfortunately varies with my energy and information. I suppose it's my philosophy of "Everything, all at once, all the time." I don't think that the fact that I am writing genre fiction is any damned EXCUSE for not writing a full-bore, character-centered, theme-weighted NOVEL. That's what I came for, anyway. And when you give everything out, you tend to get everything back. Too, I LIKE readers. A few writers write as if they hated their readers, as if readers were bad children who could somehow be punished into being good, politically correct, whatever. That if only they gave their readers enough pain (good for the soul, eh?), those readers would somehow be inspired to leap up and save the world, or the whales, or whatever the writer's agenda. I don't think people work that way. I think pain makes them withdrawn and saps energy. Not me, thanks. I don't want to punish my readers. I want to give them joy and nourishment, "to give delight and hurt not."

This response is what I've been working toward, trying to create, with single-minded and passionate intensity, for the last decade. I'm not wholly surprised; this is the way it's supposed to work. I'm surprised sometimes — gleeful, actually — that it's working for ME. It's one thing to have absurdly ambitious daydreams. It's another, and in some ways a little scary, to see those daydreams become concrete reality, one after another, right on schedule wham, wham, wham.

Is the decision to write space opera that is both serious and funny (if you want to call it space opera) a deliberate one?

Yes, pretty much. I do not think that a story that leaves out humor as a part of how people deal with their lives can claim to be realistic. Real life is both serious and funny. Humor can be a very serious psychological strategy for dealing with pain. Also, one of the things that first attracted me to sf was the humor in a lot of stories, humor I was not finding in the mainstream works I was then encountering.

I'm very interested in the genesis of ***ETHAN OF ATHOS****. In it, you've created two societies in which alien culture faces alien culture. Without lecturing or making judgements, you've put those two cultures — one marked by what some people in this country would consider an "alternative lifestyle" — on a footing of equality. What themes were you working on?*

In **ETHAN**, the primary theme was of course role reversal. It had a nice sf gizmo-idea to start, the uterine replicator. Such "baby vats" are not new in sf — Aldous Huxley used 'em in **BRAVE NEW WORLD** sixty years ago — but it seemed to me that he had not exactly exhausted their social possibilities. Another source was all those really bad Amazon Planet stories I'd read back in the early '60s, you know, the brave (male) explorers land on the all-female planet where women are fumbling around (not very competently) in then-male roles like soldiering. Ghastly. So I thought, "All right, guys, let's turn this idea on its head." **ATHOS** puts men into women's roles such as maternity and housework, and looks to see how they do. (I was a lot kinder to men than those earlier writers were to women, I must say.) So **ATHOS** allowed me to get in a lot of sly digs about how roles are divided up by sex. When there's only one sex, they gotta do it all. I've also known a few homosexuals, including an RN, who were not only competent in nurturing roles, but very competent. So naturally, the first woman my Athosian obstetrician meets when he goes off his home planet is a soldier — and not an incompetent one, either.

I guess I do consider nonpromiscuous homosexual relationships to be on a par with nonpromiscuous heterosexual ones. It is promiscuity, not homosexuality, that transmits disease, etc.; it's flaky and dangerous behavior in a person of any sexual orientation.

If Ethan Urquhart lived in America today, he'd be a Republican and belong to a men's service club like the Rotary. He's very conservative, hyper-responsible, does not question his society's mores. It was kind of fun to put every quality valued by those who denigrate "alternative lifestyles" into him — except one, of course. He's very logical — just the sort of squeaky-clean earnest person you would want to trust with your most precious resource, your children. In short, he has a woman's conscientiousness, or rather, the sort of conscientiousness that societies that are sex-divided like ours foist onto women; but, damn it, such a mindset is NEEDED by someone who's going to take on the awesome responsibility for another human life that having a child entails. Somebody's got to do it. But that somebody doesn't necessarily have to be preselected by gender.

Without being overtly "political" (given the political intensity of Barrayar, that's surprising), you manage to make some very trenchant statements about human relations, sex roles, attitudes toward people who are ill or handicapped, and war. Is it important to you to infuse your books with this sort of subtext?

Action without meaning is boring. For those who enjoy character-torture (also known as classic tragedy), why, breaking your hero's legs is as nothing compared to forking him on the prongs of a good, juicy moral dilemma, one to which the "right" answer is by no means obvious, but to which the press of events demands AN answer, willy-nilly, right NOW. Like life does. In fact, I'm not a very political person myself — my description of Cordelia, "She's about as apolitical as you can get and still be conscious and walking around", also describes me, most days. But like war, handicaps, and new technologies, politics are a fruitful source of the moral dilemmas that REALLY interest me. The politics in my books are just a means to an end, and I would advise extreme caution to anyone wishing to deduce my political views from those of my characters or my backgrounds.

I understand you have a private army — the Dendarii. How do you feel about having a group of people who are essentially "acting out" your work? Do you feel a particular responsibility toward "Vorkosigan fandom"?

Fans. I got some! Great fun. And some extraordinarily nice people, too. The rise of "Vorkosigan fandom" is a sign to me that my work is working the way I intended it to — that it is coming to life in the only way my characters can HAVE life, by the

energy of other people's minds. It shows that my work is doing for others what my best-loved reading did for me, when I continued, for example, to spin Sherlock Holmes scenarios in my head after the book was closed and Conan Doyle's voice was stilled. Doyle went far beyond "Art" — he made something ALIVE. That's my ultimate literary goal, I suppose. I don't want to create art, I want to create life. ("Life from the lab, Igor!") This takes, of course, a minimum of two persons. One to write, one to read. The actual book is not the print on the page, but the thoughts, images, and reflections that flow through the reader's mind upon reading those words. Thought, not print, is the medium of my art. The reader is an absolutely essential, integral part of this transaction. ("I want your Brains!") You can, of course, and indeed must be your own first reader, but people who boast that they write for themselves seem terribly solipsistic to me. There are now filksongs, costumes, and at least one fanzine devoted to Miles's universe. My responsibilities toward these people who complete my work include courtesy, respect, and the very best job I can do on the next book.

When you began writing, did you envision your career taking the direction(s) it has taken? What did you expect might happen? Where do you expect to go from here?

I had, or gradually accumulated, some pretty clear ideas about what a successful sf writer's career ought to be. There are plenty of role models out there. I looked around at successful writers and tried to see what they were doing, and not doing. Successful writers, for example, write in their own original universes, not other people's. They win awards, though that might be more of an effect than a cause. They write series, but are not tied to a single series. There is a certain demographic rise, timing, to recognition; there is a luck-factor, in producing the right work at the right time. Emulatable pros are calm and courteous in personal interactions at places like conventions. And so on. I tried to do some of the things I saw successful writers I admired doing, crossed my fingers, and hoped.

I expect to write a book a year for the rest of my life, or until my aphasiac stroke, which ever comes first. (Horrible thought.) Every book will not be a hit, but persistence will equal survival; my popularity and sales will rise to a certain fated saturation point, level off, and cycle up and down, with occasional "comebacks" when I get on a roll. If my brain gets too old and tired and hurts too much to write anymore, I suppose I could become an editor. IF I decide I really need new worlds to conquer, well, there's scripts. And other genres — mystery springs to mind. The possibilities are endless, but my time and energy are not, and I will have to make a lot of choices about which work to do, which will in turn shape the next set of possibilities. In the meantime, life will be kept interesting by the tantalizing, ever-retreating possibilities of supreme financial luck, such as a movie sale.

What books and influences were most important to you in the days before you began publishing? What books and influences are most important to you now?

Urgh. So many. Cordwainer Smith, Heinlein, Clark, Asimov, Herbert, C.S. Forrester, C.S. Lewis. Dorothy Sayers. Conan Doyle. Dumas, Sr. McCaffrey. Tolkien. Heyer. Randall Garrett. James H. Schmitz. Kipling. Henderson, Bradbury. Sheckley. Since I began writing, nonfiction has taken over, though I will actually buy the books of Terry Pratchett, just for pleasure. (When you are a writer, books come out of the mailbox. By the dozens. Almost never the ones you want to read. But they do pile up, blocking the import of more desirable books.)

Can you describe the procedure by which you personally broke in?

I broke in by persistence, mostly. I kept writing stuff and mailing it to New York until eventually some of it didn't come back. I had guidance during this difficult time from two good writer friends, Lillian Stewart Carl, my best friend for (oh, jeeze) thirty years this year, and Patricia Wrede, a fantasy writer from Minneapolis to whom Lillian introduced me by mail. We were penpals and a round-robin writers' workshop, exchanging chapters; Pat, having sold a novel, was most senior and had the best advice. They wrote me life-saving letters at a time when I was intellectually isolated, and the only other missives I got in my mail all started either, "You may already be a winner", or "If you have already paid, please disregard this notice." They advised me on cover letters, begging me to at least TRY to keep 'em brief and businesslike.

Under their guidance, I'd already written my first two novels (**SHARDS** and **WARRIOR**) and a couple of short stories, which slowly oscillated from Marion, Ohio, to NYC and back, with waits of up to seven months on the NYC end. Finally, a story I'd sent out a couple of times (five, I think) made its way to *Twilight Zone Magazine*, and after a four-month wait, they bought it for $250! I was ecstatic, but $250 for two years' income did not exactly impress my dubious relatives. Another year, and another novel (**ETHAN**) passed before **WARRIOR** got in over the transom at Baen Books, was read by the first reader, passed to Betsy Mitchell, who passed it to Jim Baen, who read to page 125 and called me up and offered to buy all three books, two of which he had not yet seen and only knew by my brief description in my cover letter. THAT impressed my relatives.

Re: procedure, I just mailed manuscripts from home, or rather, my local post office. Proper submission format and all that, of course. I tried when the first novel was done to get an agent, who kept the book for six months and returned it with a kind letter, but declined to represent me. It seemed like I could spend years just trying to get an agent, let alone a publisher, and then the stuff would STILL have that wait at the publisher. I decided not to try to get an agent again until I was not such a helpless supplicant. That turned out to have been after Book Seven. (I should have done it not later than Book Four.) But the wait was, I think, worth it, because I got my first-choice agent. On the downside, I now have to write a bunch more books to give her a proper list to work with. But I was going to do that anyway...things will just take a little longer to come to optimum financial fruition.

I never cease to wonder at the variety of ways in which writers work. Would you mind describing your "typical" day?

You want me to describe a typical writing day, I take it. There are many days (more than half) when I never write at all. My schedule has varied much over the years as my family's schedule has changed; I used to go to the library in the mornings till my husband had to leave for work about noon. Current system. Let us assume that the previous evening, I had a mental breakthrough and spent an hour or two locked in my bedroom scribbling outline, so I wake up (for a change) with something in mind and in hand. I wake first when my husband gets out of bed, which he does for no good reason about 6 a.m. I lie low trying to get back to sleep, or pretending to be asleep, till the kids get out of the house about 8:30. Desperate for coffee and needing to pee, I finally arise. I have to run the gauntlet of my husband's morning sociability to get to the coffeepot — he will by this time have read the paper or watched the news, and want to chat. I do not want to chat; I am trying to hold fragile strings of dialogue and evanescent images in my mind long enough to get them on paper. I chat for the minimum time I estimate I can get away

with without causing offense, wave my notebooks around in a determined way to show how serious I am about actually working this morning, eat something without any sugar in it that would put me back to sleep, and retreat territorially to the bedroom. If I frown enough, perhaps he will not come in and try to nap on my desk. I shower and dress for the day, unless the ideas are pouring out in force (very rare). I fight the orange cat for lap-space for my notebook. The fat striped gray one sleeps on my feet, all 17 pounds of him. I distract myself anticipating the mail, which can arrive anytime from 10:30 to 4:30 (I hate late mail), but eventually, I've sharpened all the pencils I can find, trotted up and down the stairs for coffee till I'm afloat, and must either start writing or go find a real job. I start writing...

To write, I must usually have a complete scene in mind. The scene is both the basic building block of all stories, and the basic organizational work-unit. I write in one-scene lumps, anything from three pages to a whole chapter. I must also have in mind the scene I just finished, and the scene that will come next, so the transitions run right. I get into my scene, having outlined it roughly, running and rerunning it in scraps in my head, and on a free sheet of paper outline almost paragraph by paragraph, then write a bit, outline a bit more, and write it. I produce about a page an hour on average (the first hour is start-up; the next I may write two pages). I write in pencil on lined paper in a three-ring binder, and transcribe it later onto my computer. My computer sits in the back of the dining room, not fifteen feet from TV and Nintendo in the living room. It's the only route to the kitchen, so it's not a place I can reliably do first drafts, which require the most concentration.

Anyway, I will work on my scene up in my bedroom anywhere from a couple of hours to all day, if I'm lucky: a minimally satisfactory day produces two pages, a good day, four, and an excellent day, seven. (Not too many of those.) Four- or five-page lumps seem to be average. Three or four or five of these sessions makes a chapter, followed by a couple of fallow days (or, heaven help me, weeks) where I type and print it, try it on test readers, and try to generate the next chapter in my mind.

In the relationships between Cordelia Naismith and characters like Sergeant Bothari, I was struck by the very deep compassion and empathy in the character portrayals. Can you speak, please, about what inspired you to create this degree of emotional intensity?

Empathy. Partly, it's an effect of Cordelia's viewpoint. She is a very compassionate person; it's built into her underlying worldview. I created that degree of emotional intensity (did I? Thank you!) because I thought it was beautiful (in the sense of powerful, not pretty), and it pleased me.

Discuss the genesis of the Vorkosigan books, if you would. What came first?

SHARDS was initially envisioned as a longer book, beginning with Aral and Cordelia's first meeting and ending with Miles's birth. As I struggled with my first novel, I'd come to a point about 80 pages beyond the current end, and the thing was getting out of hand. I was advised that editors were resistant to 800-page manuscripts from unknowns, so I back-tracked and found the current ending. I kind of knew I was out of the first book and into its sequel anyway, when whole new characters with attached subplots were turning up on page 370. I put away the discarded material in my attic, and more or less forgot about it for about six years and six books. Then I was invited to Philcon '89, and Darrell Schweitzer asked for a "short story or out-take" for the program book. I didn't have any short work, but I bethought myself of this stuff in the attic, including the infamous soltoxin assassination scene, and decided that would make a nice out-take. Sitting up there leafing through the carbons, I decided this stuff hadn't been so bad after all, and an insane desire to complete my original vision began to grow. I was fully conscious of the poor marketability of the book idea — after all, it was scarcely SCIENCE fiction at all. But it was the story I wanted to tell.

The six-year wait was good for the book. Very good. I had full control of novel structure at last; I had eight more years' experience of being a mother and a human being behind me. Because what **BARRAYAR** turns out to be about, despite the surface political-military plot, is what it means to be a mother. Through five parallel couples — Aral and Cordelia, Kou and Drou, Padma and Alys Vorpatril, Princess Kareen and Count Vordarian, and Bothari and his shadowy victim/the uterine replicator, plus Piotr, I cover five-plus different emotional constellations of motherhood, parenthood, reverberating against each other. That's what the book is REALLY about. I'm not sure how many readers will catch it, though. I hope **BARRAYAR** came out as good as I passionately wanted it to be, but I must wait for the readers in order to find out.

A number of women, yourself among them, are known for science fiction that emphasizes the military. Why do you think this is? Do you belong in their number, do you think? Do you enjoy reading work like this?

I dunno. I'm not intrinsically interested in military stuff, it's just a template to display character, easy access to action — military is a means to an end in my writing, not, as it is for some authors (usually male, who can drivel on for pages about equipment design, for instance), an end in itself. I'm interested in military PEOPLE, to be sure, but then, I'm also interested in engineers, mothers, artists, doctors... I don't read a lot of military fiction, but I do read a bit of military history and fact. If it's real, I can steal it and use it.

What influences do you think are going to modify fantasy and science fiction in times to come? Changing roles, the economy, the Gulf war, views about sexuality, civil rights, etc.

Since I view sf as allegories of change, reflecting our times — the unique hallmark of which is rapid change — I would expect EVERYTHING that changes in the real world will modify sf and fantasy. And we won't always be conscious of the process, either, except in retrospect.

Do you see any fundamental differences between fantasy and science fiction?

It's fantasy if it involves the supernatural. Alternate history, without magic, falls somewhere in another zone — I take it to be the kind of topological changes science fiction rings on science, rung on the database of history instead. "What if..." There is a difference between fantasy and science fiction, but I see it more as two ends of a continuum than two separate compartments. Some gray areas in the middle, for sure — is FTL magic? Are psi powers science? It seems to be a matter of customary law.

❧

Susan Shwartz was nominated for a Nebula for "Getting Real", a story in the anthology **NEWER YORK**. Her most recent novel is **THE GRAIL OF HEARTS**. She is currently at work on two four-way collaborations with Harry Turtledove, Steve Stirling, and Judith Tarr; is working on a historical fantasy with Andre Norton; and edits an anthology series, Sisters in Fantasy. She was recently nominated for an Edgar for her mystery, "Dreaming in Black and White". She adds, "I work on Wall Street;...and I spend *much* too much time on GEnie."

Jay Kay Klein lives in New York state, has spent a lifetime photographing science fiction fans and pros.

The Contract

by Isabel Cole

Cornelius rubbed his eyebrows, sighing softly, and wondered how long he had been playing. "Bad luck," said the stranger in the greatcoat, smiling sympathetically and gathering Cornelius's cards to his growing pile. The drinking room was deserted. Cornelius worried for a moment about his bags, lying on the bed in the common sleeping room, but Dieter was guarding them. He had never regretted hiring the taciturn Northern bodyguard; Dieter's strict discipline made him almost invincible with the sword, and his reflexes were quick, even at two in the morning. He rarely spoke; Cornelius could talk for hours without getting a single reply. It was a lonely journey, spreading the faith of universal brotherhood; he had made few converts on this barren coast.

The tavern keeper had dozed off behind the counter, and the fire needed stoking. Cornelius's fingers were stiff with age, moving painfully in the cold. Slowly he reached for his cards again.

Dieter sat without moving on the end of the bed, his face expressionless. He worried a chipped tooth with his tongue. It was a complex task to keep his head straight and still; a myriad of muscles pulled it forward, or to the side. He knew all the muscles of his body intimately, and that made it all the harder to still their complaints. Even if there was no one awake to see if his head drooped or not, there was always the ancient childhood certainty that someone was watching for the straightness of his spine, the economy of his movements. Any would-be assailants respected the apparent vacancy of his stare; such swordsmen had been known to start out of deep sleep at the slightest noise and dispatch an intruder without even waking up.

Dieter could hear the muffled voices downstairs in the drinking room. Cornelius was losing as usual. Dieter heard his weak apologetic laughter and the other man's reassuring reply. Dieter wondered if the other player would accept illuminated tracts as payment or if they would have to part with money. The next day Cornelius would ponder out loud and at length the frailties of human nature.

Downstairs there was a sudden silence. The stranger spoke quietly. For the first time Dieter found his voice disturbing. He could not make out the words, but for a moment he thought he knew the voice or it him.

Then Cornelius started up again, his voice quavering, pleading, making excuses, trying desperately to strike a bargaining note, finally breaking into incoherent relief after a short reply from the stranger. Dieter permitted himself a small reply. The game was over; he could sleep soon.

Cornelius climbed the stairs with difficulty. The stranger waited in the empty room below. Cornelius only wanted to sleep, but first he had unpleasant business to conclude.

Dieter still sat on the end of the bed. Surely he was no more than eighteen, with his beardless face, his pale brown hair, but when he sat so still he looked as permanent and immovable as a boulder. What spiritual energy he must find in that stillness! No burden, no hardship could alter it, thought Cornelius as Dieter stood smoothly to acknowledge him.

Nonetheless he found it difficult to begin. "When I took you on," he began, sitting heavily on the bed, "you were an outcast, dishonored, far from your tribe. You swore me the highest oath you know — no stronger bond exists. Long I relied on its strength, and little has been more precious to me. It hurts me more than I can say to sever it now." The blankness of Dieter's face became complete surprise. Cornelius looked away. He had counted on Dieter's silence to make the bargain easier. "Your new master waits downstairs," he said.

"Yes, master," Dieter said stiffly, bowed and turned sharply away, swinging his coat over his shoulders. Cornelius looked away and crawled under the covers.

Dieter adopted a silent, lithe stride down the stairs and across the drinking room; pride required that the stranger's first glimpse of him not be disappointing. The stranger was shuffling the deck of cards, and at Dieter's silent tread he looked up. How, Dieter did not know, certainly not from the pleasant round face, but he understood at once it made little difference what impression he made on this man.

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

"You are a perceptive young man," said Death, putting the cards into a pocket of his greatcoat. "I had to tell your former master my name first, though he caught on quickly enough after that." He put on his coat and motioned Dieter to follow him onto the street.

Dieter followed unthinking, as if by habit. He did not question where he was going, or why, until they were in the street and the wind blew a light rain against him. There were a few more houses, set back from the road, overshadowed by tall ancient trees. Just beyond the last house the road crossed an unseen stream and dropped away in the forest. Even with his sharp eyes Dieter could not tell which way the road went once it entered the trees; the forest was only another darkness tossing fitfully under the heavy clouds. Death continued down the road, his form barely visible against the great blackness. Dieter stopped, and Death turned around.

"Well, come on," he said mildly.

"What do you want with me?" said Dieter. "I never played cards with you."

"Isn't it your task to go in your master's stead?" said Death. "Did you not make a contract with him?"

Dieter realized that Death was right. He had often saved his master's life, but had never pondered the fact that he was actually the proxy for that ineffectual existence. When bandits waylaid them he fought first for honor and second for his own life; honor was not duty but the ghosts of old fencing teachers. In the words of the oath he had offered his soul as well as his sword. In legends heroes gladly gave up their souls, dying steadfast and blissful while their weeping masters recited heroic couplets. Only spirits, good and evil, to whom all human souls were interchangeable, honored that part of the agreement. Dieter had never expected his master to have the opportunity or the shrewdness to use it. Neither had Dieter seen Death's face before.

"I am a bargaining man myself," said Death, nodding absently as he followed Dieter's thoughts. "Pacts should not be entered into without full understanding by both parties."

Dieter now regretted he had left Cornelius with such professional indifference. In a little while Cornelius would convince himself that he had seen a bodyguard to a joyous fulfillment of destiny. "Why don't you take the old man!" cried Dieter, turning back to the inn and raising his voice. He stumbled over the words, not used to speaking them, but maybe no one would ever hear his voice again except the unseen people behind the windows where the last lights were blown out. "Why should I die so that a useless hypocrite can skulk about with his philosophy for a few more years?"

"You should have asked that long ago," said Death. Dieter followed him down the road, his flushed face quickly cooling in the rain. Ahead he heard the stream, and Death's footsteps on the wooden bridge. Again Dieter stopped with difficulty, for it seemed foolish to stand still in the rain when the shelter of the forest was just ahead.

Death halted and turned. "I can wait," he said sympathetically.

Dieter could not focus his thoughts. Several times he began to move forward, and then halted, remembering that he must think of an escape.

"You're a bargaining man," he said at last. "Why don't you make me a bargain?"

Death raised his eyebrows. "What can you bargain with? Your soul? I will have it someday anyway."

"I have nothing to bargain with," admitted Dieter, forming words uncertainly, but holding his ground when Death turned away impatiently. When Death saw that Dieter was not following, he turned back to him.

"I have been patient," he said. "Must I use force?"

"I want you to make a bargain with me," said Dieter stubbornly. The light cold touches of the rain cleared his mind, and suddenly he did not want to go into the dry dark forest. "Wouldn't it please you to have someone in your debt?"

Death smiled, and there was a gleam of interest in the bland face. "You judge me well," he said. "I have made many contracts. Perhaps we can reach an agreement." Dieter's clenched muscles relaxed, and he could think of nothing but the rain running down his face, drifting from the distant banks of clouds.

"I will leave you now," said Death. There was a wild eagerness moving in his face; he shifted his weight impatiently and glanced up at the sky, smelling the wind. "You will be free to go where you will, and I will not take you, unless you stay longer than a day in one place. Then I will catch up with you. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Yes," said Dieter at once; it was no more than a formality, and any protest might lose him the one point of advantage in the contract. Death walked down

from the bridge with a restless quickness, and they shook hands.

"Wait—" said Dieter as Death started back through the town. "What do you mean by a place? Must I travel a hundred miles or an inch? Or does it depend on your whim?"

"You know when you have left a place," said Death. "Outside a city's walls, out of sight, beyond the horizon. And you may never return. I will be lenient, since I pity you. Someday you will curse your contract, and sit and wait for me. Farewell." He smiled and strode off down the road.

Dieter crossed the bridge, his footsteps resounding on the boards, and walked down the uneven road in the shelter of the trees. He could no longer feel the rain, but he could hear it moving in the leaves.

"Are you going to Hanau for the festival?" the farmer asked Dieter, who rode in the back of the cart. As the sun began to sink, a town was visible atop a high cliff. Below lay the dark bay, and beyond the water rose the grey mountains of the mainland. "Ah," he sighed, "it seems as if every day's a festival, now that Lord Sobaka sits in the tower. He's the son of the god of the sea. I never thought I'd see the day — it's like something out of old tales. He blesses the boats, takes only a share of his father's bounty. I suppose he'd be richer if he stayed under the water, but he promised he'd never leave us."

"Can I get a boat there for the mainland?" said Dieter.

The farmer nodded, somewhat affronted at the brusque question. "His grace be with you," he said, glancing at the bay.

By the time Dieter reached the town the sun was setting and the monthly Festival was underway. Inside the gates there was a pen of twenty goats, and passing children wound green ribbons around their horns. They would be thrown over the cliff to Lord Sobaka's father, he remembered the farmer saying, as were blasphemers and anyone who did not feel brotherly toward Lord Sobaka. Colored paper littered the streets and clung to Dieter's boots as he shouldered through the crowd, making sure his money was in a safe pocket. He looked about for an inn, but fragrant smokes and steams from booths along the street reminded him that he had eaten only crab apples and stolen turnips in the last three days. He made his way to a stall, bought a stick of charred meat, and stood out of the way to eat it.

He was tired but alert to every movement of the confusion around him. Lamps were lit against the purple sky, portraits of the resplendent Lord Sobaka hung from windows, and every arm except Dieter's was tied with green ribbons and golden bells. Dieter smelled sausages, wine, tobacco, candles, wood, melted sugar, incense. Cornelius would have eagerly taken notes and sketched the dancers, the acrobats, the priests. Everyone knew everyone else; this was a day to celebrate old friends, old jokes, old quarrels, to decorate and dance in the streets grown dull from a lifetime of acquaintance.

But the revelers looked at Dieter and sensed a foreign presence, a man of sinister silence who did not join in the revelry. It was clear from his clothes that he had traveled long, and from his face that he was not merely a visitor from the surrounding countryside. Only an exile or a bandit would wander so far from his home. Why did he have to watch their celebration? Why did he have to walk among them, carrying a sword and clearly a dark secret as well, perhaps a curse? He watched so intently, so unobtrusively, as if he wished to steal something from them. He was quiet and easily ignored, but he cast a vague sense of ill-omen.

Dieter was used to being unnoticed, a rarely-used limb of another person, but detached from his master he knew he was as suspect as a disembodied arm. For a few minutes he had regretted not having a city to celebrate, but no longer. He ate faster, hardly tasting the food. He would find an inn and remove the pall of his curse from the merry festivities. Perhaps he had imagined the suspicious glances in his bitterness, in his certainty that just behind him was the man whom everyone would recognize.

He turned onto a side street where there were fewer people. Before he had gone more than a few feet there were angry voices behind him and a group of young men broke away from the crowd, pushing past him. He turned, dropping his hand to his sword, but they were pursuing another man. Cornered in a doorway, the man drew his knife, but the others were quicker, and he fell to the ground almost at Dieter's feet as his attackers disappeared around the corner. Dieter stepped back, offended by the careless, messy blows.

There was a scream, and a woman threw herself across the dying man. The

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

crowd began to press into the narrow street. When Dieter turned they retreated, staring at him in horror. "Cowards!" someone cried. "Are you going to let him go?"

"I didn't kill him," said Dieter, stupid with weariness. "My sword is clean." He drew it to show them, and something flew out of the roaring crowd and struck him on the head.

"You couldn't make wounds like that with a sword," said Dieter to the jailer the next morning.

"Don't tell me about it," the jailer replied. "You'll be brought to trial in a few weeks."

Dieter sank down against the wall. He had carefully noted every guard and every gate, and he considered for the tenth time whether there was any hope of escape. He wished he did not have to think; he would gladly have sat steadfast for a month, awing all observers with his discipline and composure. Given long enough his methodical mind might produce a flawless route of escape, but he had only until sunset, when Death would pass through the stone walls and iron gates and lift Dieter easily from the fastness of the prison. He wished Death had to ponder a way past each lock, each guard.

It had given Dieter a thrill of pride to make a bargain with Death; from that victory he had gained three days of hunger and cold, a bottle to the head from an angry crowd, and two hours of abusive questioning by drunken guards with green feathers in their hats. Death would be sympathetic when he came and compliment Dieter on his spirit, before he took it. It was a brave attempt, but the best had failed at it. Dieter would have to be humble as well as dead.

He refused to believe that the contract was filled so soon, when he had begun to see it as a stroke of luck that made him a free wanderer at last. He had so proudly found that Death had unwittingly dealt him a trump card. What a foolish waste if he had no chance to play it! The thought gave him some confidence. He stared at the dozing guard, the iron bars, the straw on the floor, the ubiquitous portrait of Lord Sobaka, the rats, the window grating high above, the evil-smelling torches. For an hour he sat into a narrow-eyed trance.

The jailer glanced over as the foreigner woke from his trance and stood up. He walked slowly to the wall and looked at the paper face of Lord Sobaka. The guard relaxed. The foreigner detached the picture from the wall and tore it neatly in half.

"Hey —!" protested the jailer, starting up. Ignoring him, the foreigner tore the halves into smaller pieces and began to feed them one by one into the flames of the torch.

The jailer's horrified cries soon brought help.

There was a procession that evening. First went six children, strewing flowers on the ground and waving shyly to their friends in the crowd; then the musicians playing popular hymns; then nobles and their ladies, resplendently dressed, casting coins into the crowd from little silk purses; then came Lord Sobaka himself, surrounded by his favorites. The procession left the city gates and headed up the hill to take the blasphemer from the temple where he was being prepared.

Dieter, bathed, shaved, anointed with olive oil, choked with incense, dressed in white and netted with green ribbons, was led out of the temple by two stern priests. He joined the procession and faced the angry crowd, who pelted him with small brass bells symbolizing ill-luck. The path to the cliff was short, and people struggled for a glimpse of the insolent barbarian before he was given to the Lord of the Sea. On the edge of the cliff at its highest point was a small platform, and a stone chair faced it a safe distance from the edge. Lord Sobaka stood for a moment surveying the wide expanse of water, framed against the first colors in the west. He sat in the stone chair with great dignity and watched the priests lead Dieter to the platform.

"Have you any requests?" they asked him.

"It is a grave dishonor for a tribesman to die without his sword," he said, and they returned it to him after binding his hands behind his back.

"You have one chance to repent and hope for my father's mercy," said Lord Sobaka. There was a stirring in the crowd; they would have killed for a word from their lord, and he spoke now to a criminal who had mocked him.

Dieter was not surprised to find the Lord much older and fatter than in his portraits. "It is also dishonor to beg favors of a petty lord or his vassal," he replied.

"Then only one choice remains," said Lord Sobaka, letting his angry voice rise over that of the crowd. "Will you step over the cliff yourself, or will you be thrown?"

"I will go unassisted," said Dieter, turning his back to Lord Sobaka. The sun brushed the tops of the distant mountains, red-gold as a fruit in the pale petals of clouds that formed around it. Death was very near.

"What are you doing?" said Death softly. "Does every man scorn a gentle obscure end for a moment of fame?"

Dieter did not reply. Far below dead goats washed back and forth among the rocks, green ribbons swirling from their horns. "If you wait another minute," said Death, "I will come and take you anyway. Fall, if you like. I will meet you below."

In the rippling colors on the distant water, Dieter saw an indistinct form. He smiled and stepped forward.

"Fool," said Death in resignation.

The crowd and the towers of the city were swallowed by the rising cliff. "I have left the city!" cried Dieter as he fell. "I have followed our contract—you can't take me!" For a moment he fell further, consumed by fear and exhilaration.

"You have me there," said Death.

Dieter hurtled through the glassy light of sunset, and his hands came unbound. Hands outstretched, he fell slowly through the deepening light, as if through water. Dieter felt Death's arms about him. There was no greatcoat anymore; Dieter rested in a cloak of blue and purple and gold which trailed down over the silver bay.

"You are a clever young man to take advantage of me like that, escaping me in my very arms," said Death tenderly, bending down a pale face, neither a man nor a woman. Dieter looked away from the wide beautiful eyes. The peninsula receded across the bay and the wind ruffled Dieter's hair. The mountains were close now, rising above Death's motley cloak and pale shoulders. Dieter closed his eyes in dizziness. He could hear only the rushing of the wind in his ears, and felt only a softness close about him. He was exhausted, and began to drowse, when he felt the soft cloak fall away and he was set down on the ground.

He was on the shore at the foot of the mountains. The peninsula was barely visible in the gathering dark. He felt for his sword, which was still fast at his side, and started down the beach. The waves rushed softly up the sand. Ahead were the lights of a town.

"Perhaps I can be of service to you again someday," said Death sarcastically. Dieter looked up, but the last color had

faded from the sky and the stars were large and brilliant. Death was nowhere to be seen.

"You must have other duties," said Dieter uneasily to the empty night. There was a soft laugh. All around Dieter the darkness moved, in the sea grasses, on the waves, in the leaves by the shore, and the stars flickered. Dieter trudged down the beach, weary, his green ribbons flicking in the breeze.

❧

ISABEL COLE is a first year student at the University of Chicago..."struggling with Russian and calculus and trying not to get distracted by the library's vast folklore collection." She is a New Yorker at heart, and works as an intern at Tor Books when she is there. She says, "I love to read in any genre, but I get most of my inspiration from fairy tales, music, and history." Isabel introduced us to Dieter in "Queen of Summer Forests" last issue.

MARGARET ORGAN-KEAN studied art and art history at Boston University, Central Washington University, and University of Washington. She has been a professional illustrator since age fifteen. She works as a tech writer and systems analyst. "We all double up," she says.

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Artists:

- First Place: **Vincent Di Fate** – **for "Harimau"**
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- Third Place: **Alan Gutierrez** – **for "Sea King's Harp"**

Our congratulations to the winners, and our thanks to all of you who took the time to vote!
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Marion Zimmer Bradley
Talks To Writers:
Twice The Work And Half The Money:
On collaboration

I have often wondered how people collaborate; and have found out the hard way, by doing it. There are probably as many ways — or perhaps twice as many ways — as there are stories under collaboration.

I've had all kinds of collaborations, including those done with other fans long before I actually sold anything. Since these were done by letter, long before long-distance calls were cheap or common enough for anything short of a death in the family — in those days, kids did not hang out on the telephone as they are allowed to do today — it was never used for anything short of a death in the family, or maybe a dentist's appointment, and then as briefly as possible — but in those days, it still came naturally to write letters, and of course my collaborators and I discussed our plans at length by letter. It goes without saying that this is a mighty cumbersome way of collaborating, or even of communicating — and I don't really advise it in this tenth decade of the present century. My first such serious collaboration was done, probably in 1955 or so, with a fan who has long vanished into obscurity, one Bill Oberfield; First Fandom may remember him. At that time we were writing — long distance — a story called "Space Race". Most details of the story have vanished into the holes in my brain, along with the manuscript itself, and all I remember was that war had been abolished, and controversies were settled by means of mundane competitions. I have forgotten what was being raced for; but there were three space ships: one from Earth, one from Mars, and one from Venus. (Even then, I preferred fantasy to hard science, but in the forties or early fifties, there were no markets for new fantasy works; only a few reprints were being issued.) I also tried this sort of long-distance letter collaboration with Larry Janifer, then called Larry Harris; from which I derive my continuing distaste for unnecessary pseudonyms (not stemming from difficult names or professional reputation in some other career).

My first serious professional collaborations were also with fans; even as a professional, I still kept up close ties with fandom, and once or twice I took a fan's story and ran it — with what little professional expertise I then possessed — through my typewriter. My collaboration on various short stories or novelettes, with Juanita Coulson, Dave Hammond (Jenrette), and with Ted White arose out of that. None of them were much good; but "Measureless to Man", which I later sold to the defunct *Planet Stories* — and which went unpublished to limbo with it — was my very first sale, about a year before "Centaurus Changeling".

Then we get serious. I had been writing for many years, and once or twice, when I was totally devoid of inspiration, I'd let my son David write a chapter or so — I did on **HOUSE BETWEEN THE WORLDS** — and reading it, I'd say to myself, "No no, a thousand times no" — and from knowing how it should *not* be, I'd figure out how it *should*. He still gets a small — very small — percentage.

My first really serious professional collaboration was with my younger brother, Paul Edwin Zimmer. It was in the course of the book **SPELL SWORD.** Paul being weapons-master of the West Kingdom of the SCA, knows much more than I do about weapons, and I dropped a pretty hefty problem on his pretty-wide shoulders: just how — physically how — would one choreograph the use of a weapon to be used at long distance — that is, through a spell, by *laran*?

I should emphasize — which he may or may not have realized at first — that I had envisioned that he would do this pretty much as a radio announcer broadcasts a fight: "A right to the body; a left to the jaw" — and so on.

Instead, Paul proved to be so expert at using fight scenes to delineate character — and he proved invaluable in working out what Andrew and Damon did — that it was this which inspired me to write **HUNTERS OF THE RED MOON**, and after that, the sequel, **THE SURVIVORS**. In both of these, I think I outlined the action, and every day — being a morning person while Paul is a night one — I'd go over to Greyhaven and talk

about the book, then he'd go down to bed, and I'd go home to breakfast. I thought it worked well; most of Aratak's proverbs were thought up by Paul — though I believe the original of the Divine Egg was my idea. **HUNTERS** has latterly — last month — been reissued with both our names on it...originally it was only mine, as mine was more commercial. I have not wholly abandoned the idea of doing a third book about Dane and Aratak and Rianna; it still could happen.

Money was the simplest thing about the environment; we split everything down the middle, period. We still do.

At one point I had a similar arrangement with Jacqueline Lichtenberg, on **THENDARA HOUSE**—by the basically clumsy correspondence method — but at that time she was writing other books, so I "bought out" her work and went ahead on my own. We had been pulling in opposite directions, and left to myself, I rewrote most of what she had done, according to my original concept. The important thing was that we had a written agreement, even though — or maybe because — we were good friends and wanted to stay that way.

Now, as my powers of imagination and concentration seem to be a bit less, and as I find it harder to spend long stretches of time at the keyboard, **REDISCOVERY**—written when I was just out of the hospital — was taken over and is being rewritten by Mercedes Lackey. Once again: written agreement.

In fact that's the one unalterable thing there should — and must — be about collaboration: decide what you'll do with the money. You might — who knows — be more successful than you ever dreamed. And there are as many ways of dividing the money as there are collaborators.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

Writers Talk Back

Still Here, My Dear?

by Parke Godwin

There's a marvelous moment in Stephen Sondheim's ***FOLLIES*** when a has-been actress sings, "I've run the gamut A to Z. Three cheers and dammit, *c'est la vie!*" She'd been through reefers, religion, booze, and Beverly Hills. "And my dear, I'm still here."

Last time in these pages, I wrote of fostering professional attitudes and getting a life so you'd know what you were writing about. There's another vital facet to a professional writer as important as any other: sheer staying power. Name several of your longtime favorite authors. No matter how diverse, they have one thing in common. They're survivors. They lasted.

In my novel **A TRUCE WITH TIME** (Bantam, 1988) a writer-father recalls the early efforts of his writer-son. "God, you were awful! You did everything wrong except quit." Wherein Jack Landry, veteran of burlesque, Broadway, radio plays, and magazine fiction encapsulated what his real life son is telling you today. Again, we're not talking talent. In varying degrees talent is everywhere, enough to break your heart. If the Cinderella publishing story is better known, the heart-breakers are far more prevalent. The following are typical and quite true. Only the names have been altered to protect authors' privacy and yours truly from a libel suit.

Pusillanimous Press paid Author A about $7,000 for his first novel, a good advance for a new writer. He'd written a hilarious black comedy as deserving of publication as anything else in that vein to date. Counting paper resale, he netted at least $15,000 from the book. But alas — just before publication, something happened at Pusillanimous. They lost faith in the book, got cold commercial feet, possibly decided to shift the budget to a less chancy title on their list, or all of the above. They pulled every dollar of the ad budget and dumped the book on the stands with no more advance word than a mugger gives his victim. The book died, what else? No more than a hundred copies were sold. I have one, a collector's item from the literary Trail of Tears.

Made of sterner stuff, Author A might have said, "All right, that's the game. You slowed me down but you can't stop me." He did not. Disheartened, he made vague noises about doing another novel but then went to work in a health food store. R.I.P.

Author B contracted with Shyster House for the first two books of a trilogy, her first works of fiction. Just before the first book went to press — signed contracts notwithstanding — Shyster complacently informed her that she'd either have to take a lower royalty rate or a much smaller press run that would have consigned the first volume (and likely the others) to book-limbo. What could she do? They had her, but this lady didn't like to be had. She got professional advice and learned how common, if shameful, this practice is in regard to new and vulnerable authors. She swallowed the bitter pill, finished the trilogy, got a sharper agent, and planned her next work, a wiser and far more resilient soul than Author A.

Author C had been doing well at Overblown Editions. When his agent upped his asking price on the solid success of his last book, OE met it. His three ensuing books sold poorly. OE informed Author C they could no longer contract him at so high an advance. So far, so fair. This is not horror, merely numbers. OE was going one way, the author another artistically and career-wise. Sensibly he went to another house for good money — but the last book for Overblown had its advertising cut to zero. Why spend ad dollars on a writer already gone to another house? The book did zilch on the stands. Author C muttered "Eloi, Eloi," then shuffled his deck and went back to work. Since there is, if no higher justice, at least a law of averages, his next book got great reviews and healthy sales.

"For all you get screwed in this business," he wrote to me, "it *is* nice to get kissed once in a while."

You with me, luv? Author A might have been or become one of the outstanding satirical writers in a society that badly needs them, but he didn't stay. Authors B & C knew they were in business for the long haul, gritted their teeth, and hung in. No business in the world shows profit in every quarter; there are good and bad years, thin patches when even the long-haul people would trade a peck of reputation for a bankable check. But they stay. They don't quit, because writing is what they do.

At the risk of repetition, talent is everywhere, and maybe has to be because so much of it dies young. Gets discouraged or sidetracked. Too inflated by early success and good reviews, too wounded by the hatchet jobs. By the downside of commercial publishing where a labor-of-love book can easily fall into the publishing cracks. A fine author somehow doesn't catch on with the sales force or the public. Wrong timing. Editor leaves the house, replaced by someone with other books to shepherd,

or a yuppie with his/her nose so high in the wind sniffing out trends that literary hyperventilation becomes a chronic condition. And the beat goes on.

To be comprehensive and fair, there are hopeful writers who give up not for lack of trying but perhaps from wearing their heart away against a stone or simply realizing they don't have whatever it takes. They turn to more realistic goals. This is not failure but common sense. Of the positive uses of failure, more below.

And you? You who *know* you've got it and will prevail — you're just as human as the guy who quit. You get sick of fighting all this and think in terms of a steady job for better pay. There are bills and rent to meet, you have to eat, and you want *some* kind of personal life beyond the page and the green screen. Who needs the grief? Artistically/spiritually you yearn to come in out of the cold to something with a warmer, more regular return on your heart's blood. The economic realities of life resign you to writing on the side. *Que sera sera*...but writing on the side, unless you're a meteoric talent and very lucky, you'll be regarded as someone on the side. If this satisfies you, fine, but if you have the single-minded ambition of a shark circling its supper, you have a clear decision to make. How much do you want your objective, and when do you stop circling and bite? Not at all to denigrate or slight the short form for which any novelist has a profound respect. Working on the side you may turn out a masterpiece in the form, but the bald business fact is that no matter how brilliant or showered with awards the short piece, the writer will get much more exposure, track record, and career clout (not to mention money) out of a fair to middling novel. Ask any agent: when they take on a short story writer with promise, one of the first questions asked over their first cozy lunch will be, "When can you show me a novel?"

A book is still a gamble all around. My most recent novel was the first of a two-book contract. The publisher looked at my track record, liked the odds, and gambled. I was gambling with twenty months of effort that involved travel, research, planning, concentrated work, and more days than I can count of quaking, green-gilled terror at the enormity of what I'd taken on. But if I'd quit early on, there'd have been no track record to show the bottom line people, no race to bet on at all. Which brings us to the most obscene F-word in America. Failure. God, how we hate to fail! Failure reflects on our manhood, our womanhood, makes us second-class citizens in a money culture of gimme and getting.

"God," quails the once-burned, twice-shy author, "what if I fail *again*?"

Hey — what if you do? Books are not laboratory experiments, not undertaken with a built-in assumption of failure-rate. The writer hopes for fabulous success. If contracted for an advance, the editor is praying too — how fervently depends on how far out on the money limb he went. But over the long haul, you're going to fail sometimes, because somewhere between your best efforts and the publisher's P&L statements, a *process* is in motion. You're learning, becoming more confident in your artistic choices, and every so often your dice will come up craps since there's no direct correlation between your passionate vision and what will catch the public's imagination. There's not a professional artist (by definition a survivor) who hasn't learned this comes with the territory. The most difficult, painful heart's-blood book I ever wrote earned back only a small fraction of its advance. From the dismal heart of downtown Disasterville, amid good reviews and microscopic sales, I consoled myself with the usual anesthetic about an artistic success, but the numbers just weren't there. Nobody bought it — but by that time I'd learned that failure is a part of the on-going process. You're an artist. Artists take chances, not all of which pay off.

Let me restate the obvious to keep you in perspective. Publishing is no longer a gentleman's profession. It is bottom-line, sink-or-swim, and geared to the bestseller. Despite the Jean Auels, Scott Turows, Colleen McCulloughs *et al.*, most successful writers have come a long road to where you remember their names and work.

Recently Mary Higgins Clark told in a newspaper interview of a department store book-signing early in her career. No one came near her table. She sat there lonely as a gull on a rock, hoping *someone* would come by if only to smile and say hello. Suddenly her heart leaped: a woman approached and stopped in front of her. Mary leaned forward, eager, pen in hand, gossamer futures in her heart —

"Uh...excuse me, could you tell me where I can find the lingerie department?"

Mary could not. The woman departed. Mary went on doing hard time at her table. Not long afterward, one of her books went for half a million. Her signing table is very busy nowadays.

End of sermon. Of course you can quit now and avoid all this. Or you can keep on trekkin', getting a lot right and some inevitably wrong, doing everything *except* quit.

❧

PARKE GODWIN is the eclectic author of historical fantasy and modern novels including **FIRELORD, BELOVED EXILE**, and **A TRUCE WITH TIME**. He has co-authored books with Marvin Kaye and won a World Fantasy Award for his novella, "The Fire When It Comes". His most recently published novel is **SHERWOOD**, about Robin Hood; the tale's conclusion, **CONSCIENCE OF THE KING**, was recently sent to the publisher. Avon just purchased his sf novel, **LIMBO SEARCH**.

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Artwork by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Magic

by Lynne Armstrong-Jones

It wasn't easy being the daughter of a sorceress. It never *had* been. And it only seemed to get harder the more I grew up. Especially now when I too should be showing signs of possessing those valued skills...

But I did not.

I sighed. My poor mother had become ill during the past few days and I was feeling so helpless —

If only I *too* had the power — the skills of enchantment — perhaps I'd be able to help her somehow...

But no. All I could do was try to get her to sip some of the broth I'd managed to cook. So utterly useless. I was beginning to hate myself.

And yet I would come to learn that dear Mother had sensed this even while lying ill in her bed. But, for now, I was certain I could not carry out her request.

"But Mother! The forests are said to be filled with terrors, and there are bandits on the roads —"

Suddenly a warm hand was on mine. Somehow, even in her weakened state, she could reach my soul with only a touch. Ill she might be, but some of her talents seemed weakened not.

"Child," she murmured softly, that warm hand caressing my cheek. "You must journey to Mother Canta for the healing herbs which I need. You must do it, my child. And you can do it, dear Ama. Do you think I would risk my child to an impossible task?"

"Oh Mother, forgive me! Here you lie so ill and weak, and I hesitate to get for you what you need! It's just that — that I'm frightened —"

"You know well how to defend yourself, Ama."

I fingered the sword which hung at my side. I had been practicing, it was true...

Still I shook my head. "I don't have the skill with a weapon to be successful, Mother. At least not *yet*. But you need help. And if I must die trying to get it for you, so it will be." As I spoke I straightened my spine, sitting as tall as an undergrown fourteen-year-old could.

But my legs were trembling.

"Fear not, daughter." As she spoke, she extended a hand toward me. From her thin fingers dangled a small pouch with long drawstrings. These she put around my neck and fit the pouch just inside my tunic.

"There," she whispered, that slight smile still bringing a bit of light to her weary face. "Now, child, you shall have strength the like of which you've always dreamed. All you need do is think of the power and speed you already possess, and the enchanted jewel inside that pouch will do the rest. There, my beloved. Now you are protected. Now you can go and fetch me help."

Indeed! I should have known. I took my leave, kissing my poor mother upon that still-warm forehead as I fingered the drawstring of the tiny pouch.

I headed in the direction of the forest and its dangers.

It was comfortably cool amid the thick growth. So far it had been quiet. Too quiet, perhaps?

No, I admonished myself. Don't imagine terrors. Just go quickly. Mother needs you...

The sudden cracking sound seemed to fill the whole wood. I was instantly still, afraid to move —

Then — then something — I didn't know what — was around my neck, dragging me down, down...

I gasped, my heart pounding and ice-cold terror pumping through my veins.

In my fight to push the thing away, my finger touched the drawstring...and so I thought, just for an instant, of the power and quickness it could give me. One hand grasping the thick thing which attacked me, desperately trying to keep it from tightening around my throat, I managed to tear my dagger from my belt with the other — just as the thing turned its head to gaze into my eyes with its yellow ones. But I knew I was no longer powerless. Firmly I thrust the talon-sharp point of my knife into the huge snake-thing's throat, using my magic-strength to shove the beast away quickly as it began its death-throes.

Oh, dear Mother — magic *indeed* inside my pouch!

I hastened away, happy to see the bright lights beyond the trees in the distance...

But of course, things never seem to run smoothly. It seemed that no sooner had I emerged from the forest's depths than a rather large man appeared from nowhere,

demanding all I had with me —

I knew the power now that Mother had given me. I fingered the drawstring, as though to give the prize to him — and, while his eyes were focussed on this, quickly I raised a foot and planted it in what I knew would be a most tender spot.

Then I ran, remembering what my mother had said about the jewel giving me speed. Onward and onward I went, my legs pumping hard against the ground —

Finally, there it was. The little hovel of Mother Canta. Puffing, I made my way to her door and gratefully accepted her hospitality. She was nodding as she heard give what my mother needed.

And she continued: "I can give you a potion to render you invisible, assuring you safe passage on your return —"

"But I have *this*!" I withdrew the pouch, fingering its contents —

I felt nothing! Astonished, I opened it.

It was empty.

"But — but the jewel —"

Mother Canta smiled, giving a knowing nod.

My mouth gaped open at the realization. There hadn't been any "magic jewel": Mother had known I could make my way through the dangers *myself*!

Although my eyes were on Canta, my mind was seeing dear Mother's face.

I laughed. Who could have expected that a sorceress could wield such powers as a *mother*? ❧

Lynne Armstrong-Jones has been published in the Darkover and Sword and Sorceress anthologies. Her poetry has appeared in ***Weird Tales***.

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk owned Northwest Fine Art Press. She is now art director for *On Spec*, Canada's sf/fantasy magazine.

BACK ISSUE ORDER FORM

___ Issue #1 (Summer 1988) – *Imagination and Reason* - Poul Anderson.
The Skycastle - cover story by Bruce D. Arthurs; cover art by George Barr. *The Final Bet* - Marion Zimmer Bradley.
Final Exam - Jennifer Roberson.

___ Issue #2 (Fall 1988) – *The Hitchhiker* - Jayge Carr.
Bone Serai - cover story by Susan Shwartz; cover art by George Barr.

___ Issue #3 (Winter, 1989) *** WE FOUND A BUNCH OF THESE IN STORAGE — THEY'RE NOT SOLD OUT AFTER ALL!!! NOT YET....*** *The Adinkra Cloth* (a Nebula finalist!) - Mary C. Aldridge. *Falling Apart* - Larry Hodges.
A Glassmaker's Courage - cover story by M. Coleman Easton & Phyllis Ann Karr; cover art by Frank Kelly Freas.

Issue #4 **SOLD OUT** (Really.)

___ Issue #5 (Summer, 1989). "The Dragon Issue"
Do Virgins Taste Better? - Deborah Millitello. *Dragon Three Two Niner* - Peter L. Manly.
The Dragon, the Unicorn and the Teddy Bear - Phyllis Ann Karr. Cover art by George Barr.

___ Issue #6 (Fall, 1989)– *Nightside* - Mercedes Lackey.
Aventura - Jacqueline Lichtenberg. *The Book of Souls* - cover story by Jason Van Hollander; Chesley-Award-winning cover art by Frank Kelly Freas and Laura Brodian Kelly-Freas.

___ Issue #7 (Winter 1990) – *Daughter of the Oak* - David M. Shea.
Kill Dance - Mary A. Turzillo. *The Hall of the Winter Folk* - cover story by Stephen C. Fisher. Cover art by George Barr.

___ Issue #8 (Spring 1990) "Science-Fiction-Fantasy" Issue
Change - cover story by Jo Clayton; cover art by James Balkovek.
A Swim with a Shark - Robert Collins. *Julio's Rock* - Barbara Rosen.

___ Issue #9 (Summer 1990) "Short-Short" Issue
40 stories, PLUS articles! Short-shorts by Lackey, MZB, Paxson, Hodges, Schweitzer, Waters, Rosen, Huebner, and a host of others!

___ Issue #10 (Fall 1990) – *A Dollar for your Soul* - Earl Vickers. *Satanic, Versus...* - Mercedes Lackey.
What a Wizard Does - Janet Kagan. *Vassilissa the Fair* - cover story by Micole Sudberg. Cover art by James Balkovek.

___ Issue #11 (Winter 1991) – *Brontharn* - cover story and cover art by George Barr.
Be It Ever So Humble –Tanya Huff. *Footsteps* - Marion Zimmer Bradley.
The Robber Girl, the Sea Witch, and the Little Mermaid's Voice - Phyllis Ann Karr.

___ Issue #12 (Spring 1991) – *The Connecticut Eskimo* by Madeleine L'Engle; cover art by George Barr.
Yorkshire Luck - Bob Liddil. *Sunrise* - Leslie Ann Miller. *The Girl* - Donald Backman.

___ Issue #13 (Summer 1991) – *Haut-Clare* - cover story by eluki bes shahar; cover art by Frank Kelly Freas.
According To Custom - G.E. Gaines. *Flight Of Fancy* - Morgan Noel. *On Solid Ground* - Cindy Hughes.

___ Issue #14 (Fall 1991) – *Black Ribbon* - cover story by Dawn Albright; cover art by Gail Butler.
The Tengu's Scroll - Dana Kramer-Rolls. *Guardian* - Bunnie Bessel. *The Wuzzles* - Marion Zimmer Bradley.

___ Issue #15 (Winter 1991) – *Issue in honor of Fritz Leiber*. Cover art by David Cherry.
Queen of Sumer Forests - Isabel Cole, *To Be the Best* - Margarita Serbia, *All's Fair* - G.E. Gaines.

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LETTERS

ORAL RESPONSE

Phyllis Ann Karr, WI

A crucial point of Kate Bledsoe's "Oral Robbers" letter may lie in ellipsis. As printed, neither the letter nor JAR's response mentions whether the discussion concerns storytelling for *profit*.

I have always understood and vehemently maintain that the act of publication gives members of the public the free right to share the published works orally, either by telling or by reading aloud, in most non-profit situations. Otherwise, every librarian, teacher, or... volunteer would have to contact the writers, ...illustrators, or literary estates before giving a story hour. Some authors...would be too busy granting permissions to create any new works...(And) what about parents looking for material to read to their children? ...Babysitters? Camp counselors?...Deliver me from ever growing so paranoid about my copyright as to feel annoyed rather than gratified at the thought of somebody liking my work well enough to share it orally, with or without my advance permission!

If Ms. Bledsoe...can actually hope to earn at least part of her livelihood from storytelling, then and only then does her concern make sense to me. But I feel irked that, by leaving this point unclarified, JAR's blanket reply intimates that *all* storytelling and oral reading situations need advance auctorial permission.

As for myself, there are only three situations I can think of in which I demand to be contacted for permission:

1. If the reader or storyteller hopes to clear $250 or more personal profit for the performance.

2. In the case of a benefit performance, if the net proceeds are going to charity. (Like W.S. Gilbert, I want my chance to tender a bill along with any other supplier who is getting paid. Also, there are some "charities" to which I'd rather not contribute.)

3. If any kind of *commercial* recording or broadcasting equipment is to be present. (This includes PBS!)

In other words, if enough profit may result from the direct use of my material, I want a chance at my fair share of the cash. In other cases, I here and now extend storytellers and readers permission to use my stuff, and thanks for the publicity!

Good point! I presumed that Ms.Bledsoe's storytelling would be for money (professional), but did not mention it as such.Please forgive my sin of omission, and thank you for your excellent letter.We would be happy to hear from others on this particular issue! - JAR

INTERVIEWERS' VIEWS

Sandra Brandenburg, Santa Rosa, CA

Oh my! When Debora Hill and I submitted our interviews it never occurred to us that we would be starting a small flurry. Although we do try to be not only fair, but to keep our personal opinions in the background, the latter is very nearly impossible. Thank you for pointing that out in issues 14 and 15... Because it is so difficult to keep one's self out of an article, we almost never write about anyone whose work we don't generally like. In Pat Murphy's case...I look forward to each new novel, and read them avidly when they come out. No, I don't always agree with her, but that does not in any way lessen my enjoyment of her books.

I've a message for Douglas Lent...Thank you for your response, sir. Controversial or not, every writer likes to think they are being read with that much attention to detail. I'm also very happy to learn that our Teresa Edgerton interview encouraged (you) to look for her novels. Best wishes to you, Mr. Lent, and happy reading!

OPINION POTPOURRI

Greg Koster, Tacoma, WA

Issue 15 was not bad. The best thing in it was Fritz Leiber's article, followed by the Schweitzer interview. Please show the interview to any future would-be interviewers as a model of what is possible.

I have to say this about "Harimau": despite its being the best story in the issue, it has a flaw...Ms. Dason speaks of a tiger's pupils being reduced to a dot...I have grabbed several of the neighborhood cats to investigate this, and at the cost of some scratches and a conviction by the neighborhood that I am losing my mind, I can say that domesticated cats have slit, not circular, pupils. I am thus sure that the same goes for tigers...

Slit pupils evolve in nocturnal or crepuscular hunters; housecats are definitely nocturnal, but I'm not sure about tigers. And I've never been face to face with one in dim light. (Good thing!) Does anybody out there know for sure? - JAR

It seems to me that the issues improve when stories get longer. Fewer stories means better stories. The authors have room to move about...

It takes a lot of skill to tell a really good short-short; I respect your opinion, but I don't necessarily agree with it. - MZB

About the fantasy vs. science fiction debate: I think it is time to call it on account of darkness...Ms. Bradley speaks of a story that begins with alien planets as being science fiction...but then exceptions come to mind: Edgar Rice Burroughs' *BARSOOM*, for example. If this is science fiction, then Jeanne Dixon should be Secretary of State...

All I can say is, I know science fiction when I think I see it! - MZB

MZB: HE OR SHE??

Lorin Emery, Hamburg, PA

Dear Pmt. Bradley: First, let me explain the "Pmt." Like mine, your front name leaves one uncertain about what gender you might be. Please advise. I assume you are a primate, many publishers are, thus the "Pmt."

I am, as you infer, a primate; and despite the masculine ending to my first name ('ion' instead of 'ian'), I am a woman, complete with three grown children. Now then, Pmt. Emery, what are you? - MZB

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS...

Stanley E. Ingertson, Amherst, MA

I like the friendly, upbeat tone (not of the stories, they vary, but of the magazine). Also, *FANTASY* is entertaining but not vulgar or weird for weird's sake. The writers' columns made me feel cared for...mentored. The artwork definitely enhances the reading (and is faithful to the stories) without scrambling the page layout or breaking up a story...good job.

Thanks for the encouragement! Art Weller and the artists deserve your compliments. - REH

For those of us who like to walk around in the writer's world for a few minutes after the story ends, could you provide a more definite end symbol...at the very end of the story?

Sorry, but we're going to keep our dingbat (the little symbol that marks the end of each story). - REH

The Death Of Ranat's Pass

by Katherine Blake

Mathali opened the door and closed it behind her as quietly as she could, but the children heard her anyway. They came scrambling out from behind the tapestries, their eyes big and dark. Most likely they had never gone to sleep at all. They stared at her: strange and pale she must look in the dark mourning robes. "I'm glad you're awake," she said. "We have to talk."

With a rattle of bronze rings she pulled back the tapestries that covered the children's sleeping space. The nurses sat up on their pallets, and she pointed to the door.

"Out."

"But, Highness —"

"Out. Yes, you too. Wait on the landing."

She made the circuit of the room, pulling back the woven hangings and rousing the maids from sleep. When all the room was revealed and she was certain there were none in it but the children and herself, she bolted the door. No one was going to hear anything through so many inches of oak.

The Tower Hall that had been the royal apartments for so many generations was round and had a heavy-beamed roof. Its stone walls were dark behind the bright hangings, and the windows were tiny slits. Still, she had been happy here once. She went to her wardrobe, unlacing the black velvet gown as she walked. She threw it onto the bed and stood in her undertunic as she sorted through the clothes she had worn before the world changed. Ceremonial robes, garden gowns, bedgowns with bits of lace.

"Mama?" Eight-year-old Madus was at her elbow. "Is my father gone now?"

"Yes," she said. She turned to face him. "Yes, Madus, your father had a kingly funeral and he has gone back to the fire from which he came." The boy nodded, his expression sober, perhaps not really understanding. "And now I must go too."

"Go? You too? Go where?"

"Let me get dressed. Then I'll explain."

A tunic and trews she had worn to hunt firebirds in the mountains, a tough dark green cloth with leather at the knees and elbows. That would do nicely. She put them on, hampered by Madus who was crying now and clinging to her waist. Small Janli held on to her leg, crying because her brother was crying. A cloak. Boots. Somehow she managed to get them on. Another hunting tunic, a change of linen. A leather backsack. Flint and steel. A water bottle. Her bow and quiver.

At the bottom of the wardrobe, fallen from its peg, was the silk bedgown Corus had given her when Janli was born. Her vision blurred for an instant. I will not cry. She tossed it onto the bed.

Everything but the bow and quiver went into the backsack. Food and drink stood on a sideboard, and she filled her water bottle and wrapped some bread and meat in a square of waxed linen.

"Now," she said. She sat down on the end of the bed. "Janli, come here in my lap. Madus, I want you to listen carefully. I have to leave now because your uncle Idurus wants me to."

"Why?"

"Because he feels I don't belong here. Because my blood is not royal, because I was not brought up in a King's house, he feels I would not be able to teach you the right things. He says —"

"That's stupid," Madus said. "I've got as much your blood as Father's, and if —"

"Madus, don't argue. We haven't time, and you know you won't be able to argue with your uncle Idurus. He and Aunt Kalvai are in charge of you now, and you have to do what they say. Except for one thing."

"I won't!" Madus insisted. "If you can't stay, why can't we go with you?"

"Because Idurus won't let you." She reached around Janli and gave the boy's shoulder a little shake. "You are King's Heir, but you can't be King till you're grown. Idurus is Regent for you till you grow up and have a little boy of your own." Unless — she cut the thought short. "Idurus has soldiers with swords and spears. He might use the spears on me, but he'd just tell Big Jo or somebody to pick you up and hold you off the ground till you were tired of kicking and screaming. You can't argue with your uncle; don't even try. There's just one thing I want you to do."

"What?"

"Remember me." (I will not cry.) "Your uncle — I can see the signs already — is going to make up a story about how your mother was a royal princess who died

Artwork by Rob Alexander

Artwork by Rob Alexander

young, and not a merchant's daughter from Karsten whom he put out of the house once the King had gone to the fire. Don't argue with him, but don't believe him. Madus, your father was already beginning to teach you how a King must conceal his thoughts behind his speech."

The boy nodded. "'Out of courtesy, or out of policy.'"

"That's right. Well, you can practice on your uncle. Don't dispute anything he tells you — but don't believe him either. Wherever I go, I am still your mother, Mathali Hegdist's daughter of Karsten. Whatever happens to us, you are still my children. Remember me. And when she's old enough to conceal her thoughts too, then you must remind Janli." Janli was howling again, and Madus was crying in earnest. "And some day I'll come back."

"When? How will you come back, if Uncle Idurus won't let you?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet," she admitted. "I'll think of something. Maybe I'll wait till you're King, that would make it easy."

"That's too long." Madus sniffled and blinked. "Maybe I'll think of something."

Now Janli broke off in mid-howl and spoke for the first time. "Mama have to go away?"

"I'm afraid so, dear."

"Get you a present." She slid off Mathali's lap and trotted across the room to a basket by the hearth. In it lay a cat with five kittens. Janli scooped up one of them and brought it back. "Kitten."

"Dear, I can't take a kitten with me. I'm going down the mountains, maybe across the desert."

"Sure you can," Madus said. "They're all weaned really, they just don't act like it. It can eat meat or cheese or nut butter or anything, and it'll keep you company. Which one have you got?"

The kitten was a black tom with the grey eyes of babyhood and a face like a flower, but Madus said, "That's the Captain. He's the best of the lot, and he's already learning how to fight. You need him, Mama, don't you argue. Take him to remember us by. Or Janli anyway. I wonder what I can give you?" He went to search in his chest while Mathali settled the kitten atop the other things in her backsack.

"Here," Madus said. He was holding the shortsword his father had given him last birthday. It was no longer than her forearm, hardly more than a knife. "You can remember both of us by this."

"I can't—" but something was pounding against the door, muffled by the thick

wood. Mathali slung her sack on one shoulder, her bow and quiver on the other. Then she unbolted the door.

Idurus stood on the landing, his thumbs tucked into his belt. The nurses and maids were nowhere in sight; he must have sent them running. He was a big man, past the prime of life, and his beard was streaked with grey. "Are you ready?" he asked, and before she could answer he said, "Put off that bow. I'll not have you going from my house armed."

"'Armed'?" she repeated; the bow was a light one, better suited to bringing down deer than armored men.

"Put it off."

"A man with a castle full of soldiers," she said slowly, "is afraid of a woman with a bow." She dropped the bow and quiver to the floor. "I suppose that's right." She turned her back on him and knelt. Janli's plump baby arms went tightly around her neck. Madus approached slowly, his hands behind his back. She put an arm round him, and, under cover of her cloak, he slipped his shortsword into her boot — she felt the cold metal slide along her ankle. The boot-top was just high enough to conceal it. She hugged him once more and whispered, "I will be back. Remember me." Then she rose and followed Idurus down the tower stair. The shortsword fit snugly in her boot. An inch higher and it would have shown; an inch lower and it would have played havoc with her ankle. She held her head high and concentrated on walking normally.

In the Great Hall fires were burning on all the hearths, for it was nearly midnight and the air was growing cold. Idurus's wife Kalvai stood between two fires, her tame mage Gethfen at her shoulder. Mathali felt suddenly cold in spite of the fires. Idurus had been her husband's elder by several years, and would have been King if he had been able to get an heir on Kalvai. But the royal families were old and cold, and the seed withered in the wombs of the princesses and noble ladies, while her Corus had fathered two children on the merchant's daughter.

Kalvai's eyes were alight with triumph, and Gethfen's with anticipation. If those two got together to give Idurus something he could call his heir, no bookie in the Mountain Ring would give even odds for Madus's life. The High One forbid it. With any luck, Kalvai would be too old to conceive, even if she smuggled a firedrake into her bed.

Idurus walked straight through the Hall to the big iron-bound door and thrust it open: cold air drifted in and made the fires leap. Idurus stood beside the door, thumbs in belt. Kalvai took a step forward; Gethfen laid a pale-gloved hand on her sleeve. Mathali stood where she was. For a long moment no one spoke.

"Well!" Kalvai burst out. "Go, then! What are you waiting for?"

Mathali smiled just a little. "My dowry."

Idurus glared at Kalvai. Kalvai looked at Gethfen; he was looking elsewhere. One could almost hear them: "I told you she wouldn't forget; but no, you had to try to be clever."

It was always like pulling teeth to get Idurus to lay out money, and she felt a moment's pity for the people of the Kingdom; under his Regency they would eat roots and wear rags. But a widow being sent away took her dowry with her; that was good law all around the Mountain Ring. If Idurus tried to break it, her father's House would make common cause with the rest of Karsten and Gaii to hire the best army money could buy, and send it to burn him out.

"It's on the table," Idurus said. (A point to her.) A pile of shining coins, with a sash to carry them in, sized for a larger waist than hers. They were not the same crowns she'd brought with her, of course, that her father had collected over some years of trade. These appeared all to be from the same mint, and that was interesting. She counted them swiftly by fives and tens, as she had learned to do as a child, while her watchers fumed. The count was correct. (Another point to her.) She bundled the coins into the sash and tied it round her waist.

"There's been a rockfall on the Great Road," Idurus said as she tied the last knot. "You'll have to go by Ranat's."

"Ranat's Pass, at this hour of night?

"Why not?" Kalvai said. "You're not afraid of those old tales, are you? You've been down Ranat's a dozen times, and it's on your way to Karsten."

That was true, as far as it went. She had been down Ranat's before — though only in the daytime — and it was on the way to Karsten — but she wasn't at all sure she was going there. She walked out of the Hall, through the courtyard where troops stood under torchlight, and paused at the gate. The guards glanced at her out of the corners of their eyes, then stared straight ahead as the corporal of the watch went by. Outside, a troop of men with mattocks over their shoulders were filing down the right-hand pass into the Great Road. Maybe it was true, what Idurus had said; maybe there had really been a rockfall. Maybe the men were going off to start one. She was not going to find out just now. She stepped off the threshold of the gate, onto the path that led off to the left toward Ranat's. (A point to them.)

A moon in its last quarter had risen behind her, and for the first quarter mile it lit her way down the gorge. A mountain river had run here once, in days of wetter weather, and the sand still tended to be damp. You could scratch a hole in the sand and find water, bad-tasting but drinkable, and the tales told of caverns full of water underground, but she had never seen any caves that might lead to them. The rocky walls had risen high overhead, and the waning moon behind her threw a long filmy shadow ahead of her on the path.

The tales told... She sifted through her memories. She had studied minstrelsy when she was young, might even have gone to the Hall of Bards if she hadn't met Corus. Of the hundreds of songs and tales she knew, perhaps five mentioned Ranat's Pass. In four of these, the protagonist had simply gone down the Pass — in the dark, or on a cloudy day — and never been seen again. The fifth, in a catalogue of monsters, listed "The Death of Ranat's Pass, / As dark as dreadful night."

Here the path turned, as the Pass angled toward the south, and a few steps would take her out of the pale moonlight into complete darkness.

Again she searched her memory. The Pass ran southward for another half mile or so. There it turned west again and down to the desert floor in a steep flight of broken rock, like steps sloppily built by apprentice giants. There were no branches, no wrong turnings, and only one blind alley off to the right somewhere. If she kept her left hand on the wall all the way, she should be all right.

Something shifted in her backsack: the kitten stretching, with a faint mew, and curling up to sleep again. She took a deep breath and stepped into the inky shadows.

She went a hundred paces, two hundred, and nothing happened. A dozen stars shone in a thin line high overhead. Three hundred. The darkness that muffled her eyes had sharpened her other senses, and she heard the gravel shift under her feet with every step she took. The rock wall was silky-smooth under her fingers, as if polished by long years of wind or water. The air was heavy with

Artwork by Rob Alexander

the scent of fog, like the dense fogs that rose out of the lowland valleys outside the Ring. Yet the thread of stars overhead was still bright and clear. Four hundred paces. Her feet were slowing down. The smell of mist was thick in her nostrils, a rank smell like the acid engravers etched brass with, and she stopped. The sound continued, a gently rustling sound like the sifting of sand. Her feet seemed rooted to the ground, her fingers frozen to the wall. The stars still glimmered overhead, but in her mind the lights were going out. Like the sand, she sifted downward into a darkness like sleep or death.

Something was crying in the darkness, a thin wail that set her bones itching. Shut up and go away, she thought, but the crying would not let her sleep. If she could sleep for a thousand years it would not be enough, and she was not to have even ten minutes. "Nurse, bring her here," she said. There was no answer. The baby went on crying, resonating up and down her spine like wind in the temple columns, a sound impossible to ignore, a cry fit to wake the dead. "Nurse, wake up." Damn whatever godlet had chosen to perpetuate the human race this way, by giving babies mothers who couldn't sleep when they cried. "Nurse. Corus, would you shout for her, please?" She kicked sideways to wake him, but Corus was not there. She was lying on her belly on the sand, half-propped on her elbows. The kitten mewed and wailed in her pack, and under that was the soft persistent rustle over the sand.

She struggled to her knees and turned. Two spots of misty white hung in the darkness, perhaps reflecting the pale starlight, perhaps making a faint light of their own. Impossible to tell how big they were, or how far away: coin-sized, maybe, up close, or melon-sized a bowshot off. They swayed from side to side, slowly. They were growing larger, or closer, or both. Mathali clambered to her feet, her back against the wall, and fumbled for Madus's sword in her boot.

The sifting noise was loud in her ears, and the lights must be close; they were the size of apples, gliding along at shoulder height. She braced her feet and swung the sword, waist high and at arm's length, like someone beating a rug. One of the lights went out, and the other danced crazily back and forth in the darkness. There was a hissing sound like a kettle boiling over, and at her feet a choked bubbling sound. And at that moment the westering moon rose over the rim of the gorge and flooded its sandy floor with light.

To her eyes, long in the dark, the quarter moon's light was bright as day. Against the stark white of the sand the creature lay black and glistening. It was long and smooth, like a drop of pitch from the World Tree, like a dragon's turd, about a fathom long. It looked, in fact, like a great slug, like the great-grandfather of the yellow slugs that attacked her garden boxes in the summer. Like them it crawled along a trail of slime, a thick acidic slime that fumed and stank in the moonlight before sinking into the sand. And like them it had worn its eyes on two long stalks that rose from the front end of its body. Her sword-stroke had severed the left eyestalk, and it lay against the creature's back, stuck fast by its own slime. The other eye, bent almost double on its stalk, was rubbing the base of the stump and gingerly touching and peering at its severed end, as the beast whistled and bubbled with pain. Mathali did not stop to sympathize; she ran.

But she could hear the whisper of the sand behind her; the thing was following her, faster than she'd have thought a slug could move. The ground was growing rougher, the sand giving place to boulders; here the vanished stream had run foaming over rapids, and the Death of Ranat's Pass was gaining on her. In all this scrambling about she had not let go of Madus's shortsword. She clambered over piles of rocks, climbed onto a stone as big as a horse. She swung at the eyestalk as the thing slithered past; missed; swung again. The eyestalk fell to the sand and Mathali took advantage of the beast's few moments of agony to climb higher among the rocks. She might be safer with the thing blinded, but not by much; could it hear her, or smell her? Could it feel her footsteps through the ground?

The kitten in her backsack wailed again, and she had her answer; the creature's forward end rose from the ground like a snake (she caught a glimpse of a toothless, sucking mouth) and pointed toward her. Laboriously it crawled up the side of the nearest rock and down the other side, following her. She retreated cautiously, stepping from one stone to the next.

The acrid slime it left on the rocks hissed like soda in the wash, and she realized why the walls of this gorge were so smooth: they had been eaten away by the acids the slug secreted. She glanced at the shortsword. Its blade was dark and discolored, and she must clean it quickly if she ever got out of this. And all at once

she understood why Idurus had sent her this way. He had never meant her to take her dowry away; he had other plans for it. He had sent her along this path to be dissolved and eaten by the Death of Ranat's Pass, skin and flesh and bone and clothing all together, leaving only the gold to be picked up in the daylight. "You son of a whore," Mathali said, and never mind what this implied about her own Corus. Corus would have understood. The slug shifted its course and slithered toward her.

"You abuser of putrefying goats. You gold-fondling inhabitant of a stopped-up drain," she said, stepping carefully from boulder to boulder as the beast followed her. "What are you doing with all the gold, Idurus? Buying yourself a new wife, or her a new lover? Not corrupt enough for you yet? Stake them out on the sand and let the blowflies at them." Somewhere around here, the ancient rapids had poured down over a cliff in a cataract three or four fathoms high.

With a final taunt, comparing Idurus's virility and personal hygiene unfavorably with those of the slug, she found the dry cataract and climbed to a rocky outcrop above it. A series of little pebbles tossed into its path led the beast right over the edge.

But, as she'd half-feared, it didn't fall. It clung to the rock and oozed its way down. So she took up a melon-sized rock, hefted it thoughtfully, and dropped it. While the beast twisted and whistled with pain, she rolled a larger rock into position and pushed it over. It landed with a satisfying splash, and there was a very pleasant silence.

"Another point to me," she said presently. "And what were you planning to do with the gold, Idurus?" The thing for which small princes in the Mountain Ring most often needed money was conquest of their neighbors, and she couldn't imagine how Idurus would be doing this for Madus's benefit. "I shall have to keep my ear to the ground. But not around here." She cleaned Madus's shortsword with a bit of rag and some wet sand till it shone again, and put it through her belt at the small of her back. Then, avoiding the steaming slime trails where the beast had passed, she made her way down the uneven steps of the rockslides. By the time she reached the bottom, the Death of Ranat's Pass was dissolving in its own acids, seeping into the gravel beneath it. Mathali kept going. Where there was one of these creatures there could easily be more.

She was near the end of the Pass; only a few hundred more paces till the gorge opened out at the rim of the desert, where the Round Road ran over the shallow sand at the foot of the Mountain Ring. There was an inn there where she could get breakfast and news. After that she could decide on her road — but she knew already that it would not lead back to Karsten. Not yet; and not as herself.

(She could imagine clearly the reception she would get in her father's house. *You poor dear. Go upstairs and rest in your girlhood bed, while I put your dowry back in the strongbox.* And there she'd stay till her father found her a new husband to his taste, and she would never go back to Madus and Janli.)

The kitten was wailing again, probably from hunger. "Hush, Captain," she murmured. "You're a fine brave cat and I'll feed you in a bit." When they reached the road it was still an hour before daybreak, and the inn was still fast shut, so she sat on a bench outside and fed the Captain on shreds of meat from her pack. When he was full, he curled up on her breast and went back to sleep. She cradled him in her arms, rocking him back and forth, crying and crying until the sun should rise and the inn open its doors. ❧

KATHERINE B LAKE used to be your typical little old Berkeley lady in Birkenstocks. She still has the Birkenstocks, but no longer lives in Berkeley. Her novel **THE INTERIOR LIFE** came out in 1990 and went right back in again, leaving scarcely a ripple to mark its passing. She is now trying to decide between the invading-aliens novel and the sentient-planet novel (or the Arthurian novel, or the Wagnerian novel, or...).

ROB ALEXANDER's artwork arrived in color; look for it at a convention art show.

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Dragonfire

by John P. Buentello

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

Faragon watched from his mountaintop as the small figure moved slowly along the valley floor. He had been watching the dark dot during the days it had taken the rider and his animal to cross over from the far edge of the valley. Now both neared the base of his mountain. Very soon the man would be here.

The dragon stretched his great neck upwards, scales flashing in the hot sun even as they cast a shadow across the nearby hills. The man below might see such obvious movement, but it didn't matter. Faragon knew long ago the rider would reach him. He'd known when the idea first came into the man's mind. Faragon had felt it in his dreams atop his mountain. It had been urgent enough to drive him from his eon-long sleep.

The man called himself Baltan. Not his real name, but one a wizard would find useful. He used it often in his thinking as he rode. Faragon found such musings interesting, but then this kind always did think grandly. This one thought more grandly than most, and Faragon found it bothered him more than it should. Could the man actually make his idea work?

No matter. There would be time enough to learn of that when the man arrived. Faragon lifted his great horned head above his shoulders, something he had not bothered to do in centuries. He worked the pair of leathery wings lying like loose folds of skin along his back. His dream vision had not revealed whether he was to meet the wizard here on the mountain or elsewhere. Faragon assumed the choice was still his to make. Better the valley floor. That way his resting place would not be disturbed when the battle began.

Thousands of fiery bursts lanced through the membranes along his back, and he felt blood being pumped back into veins that had been stilled long ago. He'd slowed the flow of his blood so he might sleep the centuries in peace, as a tree withdraws its sap in winter. Faragon was no tree, however. He was far older than any of the woods that dotted the hillside.

At last he felt strength returning to sleeping muscles, and spread his wings outward. They unfolded like great living fans, spreading to touch the rims of the twin peaks between which his body lay. He moved them slowly, watching the resulting winds push the trees into the hillside.

Faragon's body was a monstrous thing. Where his torso had lain for so long it had carved a deep chasm in the bare rock. Even so, the wings lifted him effortlessly, suspending him above the mountain. Drawing a deep breath into his lungs to play at the fire already growing there, the dragon left his mountain, diving down to meet the man below.

To his credit, the wizard did not turn and run when he saw the dragon descending toward him. His horse, a well-trained animal not easily spooked, pulled against its reins and began to tremble, sensing death approaching. Baltan stroked its black mane, calming it as best he could.

When the dragon was no more than a thousand feet away, the wizard drew a pouch from his cloak. He hadn't expected the dragon to meet him here. All the signs he consulted back in the city had assured he would meet the creature on the dark mountain. Here on the valley floor he was too exposed.

Faragon stopped his arrow-straight flight when he came within a few body lengths of the man. He drifted to the valley floor, folding his wings to rest once more along his back as the dust settled around him and the man. He watched the man silently, the barest scent of Falart root coming from the bag clutched tightly in the wizard's hand. That was disappointing. He'd hoped the

man would not cling to such superstition.

"Dragon," the wizard said slowly. "Come no closer." He raised the bag and shook it.

Faragon spoke, and the words became alive in the man's mind. "How do you know me for a dragon? You have never seen one."

The question seemed to trouble the wizard, and Faragon listened as the man attempted to unravel his thoughts. "I know you," Baltan finally said. "I have studied you all my life."

"Impossible," Faragon said, feeling his claws sink into the soft earth of the valley floor. He much preferred the rocky terrain of his home. "How can one study what one has never seen?"

"Humans do it all the time," Baltan assured him. He dangled the bag at the dragon again. "You know what this is?"

"Stinkroot," Faragon said, running a black tongue across his lower jaw. The sight made the horse start. "It stings the eyes and nose. It cannot harm me."

Baltan looked at the dragon, noting the brilliant ring of light that glowed in each eye. He threw the bag to the ground. "Dragonkind never lies, does it?" he said, smiling in a way another human might have found distasteful.

"Dragonkind cannot do what there isn't to be done. Lies are human things." Faragon found it difficult to form the ideas in the man's mind. He had never found human thinking to be a very useful thing.

"I have spent many years looking for you," the wizard was saying. "I seek knowledge."

"Power," Faragon translated. "The power of death." He opened his mouth wide, revealing bone-white teeth that could easily impale a man. Beyond the rough tongue a glowing coal of fire burned furnace-hot. Faragon blew outward, his breath turning to steam as he pushed a lance of flame to rise into the afternoon air.

Words formed in the man's mind with such force that the dragon felt their power before he deciphered their meaning. "Dragonfire. Born of the soul, brighter than sunlight, hotter than hell's flame. Nothing living can stand in that flame and survive. No weapon forged by man is its equal."

"That is true," Faragon said, closing his mouth again. "And only dragonkind may wield it. What you desire cannot be done."

The wizard smiled again. "Suppose you allow me to worry about that. Since you know what I'm here for, I'll get to the point. In my studies of dragonkind I have discovered the various legends about its hoards. They say you hoard not only treasure, but magic as well."

"Dragon magic," Faragon replied. "It is something you would not find useful."

Baltan nodded. "I know. Only dragons can possess such magic. But it isn't magic I'm interested in. I want you to use your magic to grant me a wish."

If Faragon were capable of smiling, he would have done so then. "If I did possess such magic, I could not use it to give you the power of dragonfire. It would consume you and anything you used to contain it."

"Trust me, there is a way."

The dragon looked into the man's mind again, and, for the first time in his long existence, was surprised. He was certain there was magic enough in his hoard to accomplish the task, and yet he wondered what the result would truly be. The wizard was apparently not as knowledgeable about dragonkind as he claimed.

"An interesting notion," he said, stretching a scaled claw toward man and horse. "But why should I not simply destroy you now and be done with it?"

Baltan held the reins tightly, refusing to let his animal bolt from the shadow of the giant claw. "I am prepared to earn the wish."

Faragon hesitated in closing his hand. "What do you mean?"

The wizard pointed toward the mountain beyond. "I propose a contest. A race. From this point to the base of the mountain. If I win then you grant me my wish."

"And if you lose?"

Baltan shrugged. "Then either I leave or you kill me."

Faragon considered the wager. He had no fear the man would win. He would be to the mountain and back before the wizard could spur his mount to a gallop. Killing him now would save the dragon the trouble, but he had not been driven from his sleep simply to kill this wizard. There was something more, something his dream vision hadn't revealed.

"I agree," the dragon said, withdrawing his claw. "But if I beat you, then I do so with whatever means I possess. There must be no conditions."

The wizard nodded and drew his horse alongside the great bulk of the dragon. He watched while Faragon spread his wings, unfolding them to blot out the sun. "Shall we begin?"

Faragon did not bother to respond. He pushed his wings back, feeling the wind fill them, and rose from the valley. He heard Baltan's horse snort loudly, but paid no heed. His mind was at the mountain, and home. Once he reached it, he would wait for the man. Perhaps he would kill him, perhaps not. In any event, his sleep would be interrupted no more.

The sun turned the dragon into a rainbow of green and gold as it played across his scales. The wind, which he had not felt for so long, flowed around him like an invisible stream. It had been too long since he felt such freedom. Faragon treasured sleep, but perhaps he had slumbered too long.

Below him the man commanded his horse to be still. He watched as the dragon became a dwindling patch against the mountain. Such speed he did not believe possible, even for something so legendary as a dragon. Still, what he'd read about dragons seemed true. Dragon thinking was a limited thing. If it was not, this one would not be relying on muscle power alone.

Faragon heard a snapping sound below and behind him, like the breaking of a massive tree. A tingling began beneath the scales along his spine, and he realized he was feeling the residue of magic seeding the air. He opened his mouth and roared in anger, belching a ball of flame that turned the air to black smoke. He dove forward through the sky, beating his wings savagely, knowing he was already beaten. The white heat of his flame could not match the fire burning in his heart.

The man was waiting for him at the mountain's base. His horse still trembled from the effects of the spell that had carried them there. The wizard seemed shaken too, but he smiled when he saw the dragon approaching. The smile vanished when he heard Faragon's angry roar fill the air.

"You tricked me, man!" The dragon's words were hot flame in the man's mind. He dropped to the ground and reached for the wizard. This time he would not hesitate to kill the creature.

"You set the rules," Baltan said quickly, reaching for the pouches at his side. "Remember, you said by whatever means we possessed. You used wings. I used magic."

"Human magic," Faragon snorted. "An unnatural thing."

"Many would call a dragon unnatural," the wizard replied. He replaced the pouches, satisfied his point had been made. "The fact is I won. That means you

owe me a wish. Unless, of course, dragonkind does lie after all."

Faragon snapped his teeth together and shook his head. "Name your wish, human, so I may be rid of you."

Baltan dismounted immediately, pulling his saddle after him and removing the reins from the horse. He stroked the animal's mane one final time, then slapped it away, driving it back toward the valley. He turned to the dragon again and nodded.

"All right, I'm ready. You know what I wish. I want to be a dragon."

Faragon decided he would never understand such creatures. He dug a single claw into the ground and made a series of markings. The air between dragon and man began to shimmer, and tiny static charges played upon the scales of Faragon's claw.

"Are you certain about this, man? My power is not infinite."

The wizard frowned. "Are you saying you can't do it?"

Faragon shook his head. "You will be a dragon. Not a large one, and with no magic to your hoard, but you will have the power of dragonfire. The power to enslave your fellow creatures."

"Not enslave," Baltan corrected, reaching out to feel the magical field forming before him. His arm jerked with the pulse of power that filled it. "Control is what I want. I want to rule over the greatest kingdom in the land. To do that I need power. The power of dragonfire. A weapon no one can resist."

Faragon did not feel like continuing the argument. He knew human and dragonkind would never see things alike. They never had.

"Prepare yourself," he told the man. Faragon closed his eyes and caused the intangible hoard of magic to come to him. It would take only a small amount of the hoard to accomplish the spell, but Faragon still hated to part with it. Magic was for hoarding, not using. He hoped humans would one day come to realize this.

Baltan showed no fear as he entered the magical field. He smiled at the dragon, then stepped into the shimmering wave. His body convulsed once, and then was gone, borne along on the magic current. Faragon concentrated on keeping every part that was the wizard together. He had to hold him long enough for the magic to work.

In another moment it was done, and the man was gone. In his place stood a dragon. It was not a large dragon, and his scales had not yet lost the burnished sheen of youth. Still, his wings were the correct size for his body. All the muscles seemed to flow in the proper manner, and when the small dragon opened his mouth, Faragon saw a tiny spark of blue-green flame resting there.

"How do you feel?" Faragon asked.

The other dragon lifted its slender neck and stared at Faragon. "I feel fine. I take it the spell worked. Am I a dragon?"

Faragon looked over the dragon from snout to tail. "You seem to be. Can you fly?"

Baltan looked at the pair of wings behind him. He moved them carefully, then pushed against the wind, lifting his body into the air. As Faragon watched, the small dragon circled slowly above him. Before descending again the dragon opened his jaws and breathed a long, straight stream of flame before him.

"Well, you possess dragonfire," Faragon said after Baltan had settled to the ground. "Now I suppose you'll be off to begin forming your kingdom."

Baltan scratched his snout with a small talon. "Is that what I intended to do?"

Faragon nodded. "You wished to enslave other humans."

"Whatever for?" the younger dragon asked. "Humankind is more trouble than it's worth. Better for a dragon to stay clear of such creatures."

"I've always thought that. What will you do now?"

Baltan shrugged. "I'm in the mood for some sleep, I think. I seem to be without a hoard at the moment, so I'll need enough rest to hold me for a while."

"There's a nice, rocky plateau at the southern end of the valley," Faragon said. "Humans do not go there, so you will be undisturbed."

Baltan nodded and rose into the air again. "Thank you for the information. If I do not see you again, may your line stretch through the whole of dragonkind."

Faragon watched until the small dragon had disappeared on the far horizon. He doubted he would see Baltan again. Dragons were not the type to band together. Dragons only needed a place to sleep, hunt, and gather hoard. Humans were the ones who had a need for each other, and the need to destroy each other. Baltan the man had desired such power. Baltan the dragon had no desire for it.

Faragon lifted himself into the air, climbing toward the distant peaks. His dream visions were true after all. There had been reason enough to awaken from his sleep. Humankind and its lot were something not to be troubled with, but anything that caused another dragon to be born into the line was well worth the effort. Faragon opened his jaws and bellowed, blowing a crimson jet of dragonfire as he climbed higher toward home.

❧

Artwork by Bob Eggleton

John P. Buentello is currently teaching at a court reporting school in San Antonio, Texas, and has been writing since his early teens.

Bob Eggleton, a Rhode Island artist, has won numerous awards for his artwork.

No Natural Beast

Kit Wesler

The tiny glade was lit by a single campfire, throwing the surrounding woods into impenetrable blackness. I stood silently behind an oak, watching. I had come as quietly as a born hunter can stalk, but the man sitting behind the campfire knew I was there. He waited. Behind him, his unsaddled horse cropped stolidly at sparse weeds, barely visible at the edge of the trees. After a pause, I stepped into the ruddy firelight and strode toward him, my hands ostentatiously empty.

The man never moved, but his hands remained hidden under the cloak that shrouded him like a small tent. He wore no hat or helm, and even in the firelight, the grey of his hair was dull as lead. As I stepped closer, I could see the stubble on his chin, and the long scar that swept from temple to jaw. His brows shadowed his eyes, but I knew they were grey like his hair, and bleak as a midwinter sky. His face wore the look of a hunted man. I knew that look. I had worn it myself.

"Greetings!" I called, trying to sound like a chance-met traveller. "Share a fire on a chill night?"

He gestured, "Sit," with a minimal nod. I settled crosslegged across the campfire from him, hands open on my knees, and looked into a face I knew all too well. He was Glaedwyr of Serai: lord general, queen-killer, embattled usurper, fugitive. He was Glaedwyr of Serai, and I had followed him down a long, long road.

We stared at each other a moment, and I knew that he would never believe that I was an innocent traveller, not here. I said, "This deep in the Dark Forest, you'd think nobody would follow you."

He answered, "You've come for the price on my head."

"No," I said. At the trace of scorn on his scarred face, I explained, "I don't care about the money."

His lips twitched in fleeting amusement. "Who are you?"

I said calmly, "Caleb DeBray," and had the satisfaction of finally seeing him surprised.

"Caleb DeBray," he repeated. "Well, well. You were the best of the partisan rangers. Your rebel band kept the pick of my cavalry tied up in knots in the Eastern Marches."

"They kept us on the run," I said.

"They claimed you knew the woods like a fox, that you went to ground like a badger. The claimed you spoke to beasts," and here the the trace of scorn crept back onto his shadowed brow, and into his voice.

"I do speak to beasts," I told him. "Like the one that just killed your horse."

He never even blinked. "I heard nothing."

"He is not a natural beast," I said.

"Nothing could kill a horse that quietly. Nothing big enough to kill a horse could move that quietly. If you intend to try to kill me, get to it, but don't play games!"

"No game," I said. "He is a Great Beast."

He sneered. He had grown up on tales of the Great Beasts, told by nurses and nannies and cruel older siblings.

"This is the dark forest," I said. "The Great Beasts are real."

"And elves and trolls and ogres are real."

"And magical queens," I suggested, and saw him wince. "The Great Beasts are the lost souls of the Dark Forest. They...coalesce, at night, formed of shadow and hunger and hate. They kill. The one who killed your horse is like that. He's standing behind you now. The firelight gleams on his tusks. I'm surprised you don't feel his breath on your neck."

Glaedwyr of Serai watched me steadily, unshaken.

"He stands on two legs," I added.

Glaedwyr flipped aside the edge of his cloak, revealing the cocked crossbow he had kept trained on my chest since I had first stepped into the glade. I knew that he would never turn to look behind him. He raised an eyebrow.

I smiled.

The beast struck.

❧

KIT WESLER is an archaeologist living and working in western Kentucky. He has field experience in the Eastern U.S. and West Africa, which he is trying to draw more into his fiction. He has had two previous short stories printed in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*, a longer story in *Dragon Magazine*, and has made several sales to *Poetic Knight*.

Lessons in

Artwork by Damien Willich

the Dark

by Sandra C. Morrese

The battle had become endless. Bodies rose and fell before her in a scarlet blur of unceasing violence. How long like this? Her sword came up and spilled an enemy's blood in the downstroke. He was replaced by another.

We are sorely outnumbered, she thought. *In the end we shall all have our turn on their blades.*

Yet she continued, and her employer's foes continued to die.

She saw the blow coming. As it came crashing down, a distant part of her mind slowed and acknowledged that she could not deflect this one. But knew her opponent, too, would fall. Her head exploded with the burning pain of his blade, but she managed to complete her turn, felt her own blade slice flesh, and saw the surprised agony on his face. Then she saw nothing but spinning darkness and blessed oblivion.

Five-year-old Gara watched as her mother donned chain mail and leathers for the arena. Isa was one of the best, and so they had one room all to themselves in the slave compound. Isa signed victory to her daughter and smiled. Gara returned the sign and smile, then returned to her game.

Ten-year-old Gara sat on the edge of the straw pallet she shared with her mother, watching her ready herself for yet another fight.

"Mama," she said seriously. "Why don't you call Freedom Challenge? Carak says you have more than enough wins."

Isa stopped and looked at her daughter. Then she knelt and clasped both Gara's hands in hers. "Because I will not leave you," she said earnestly.

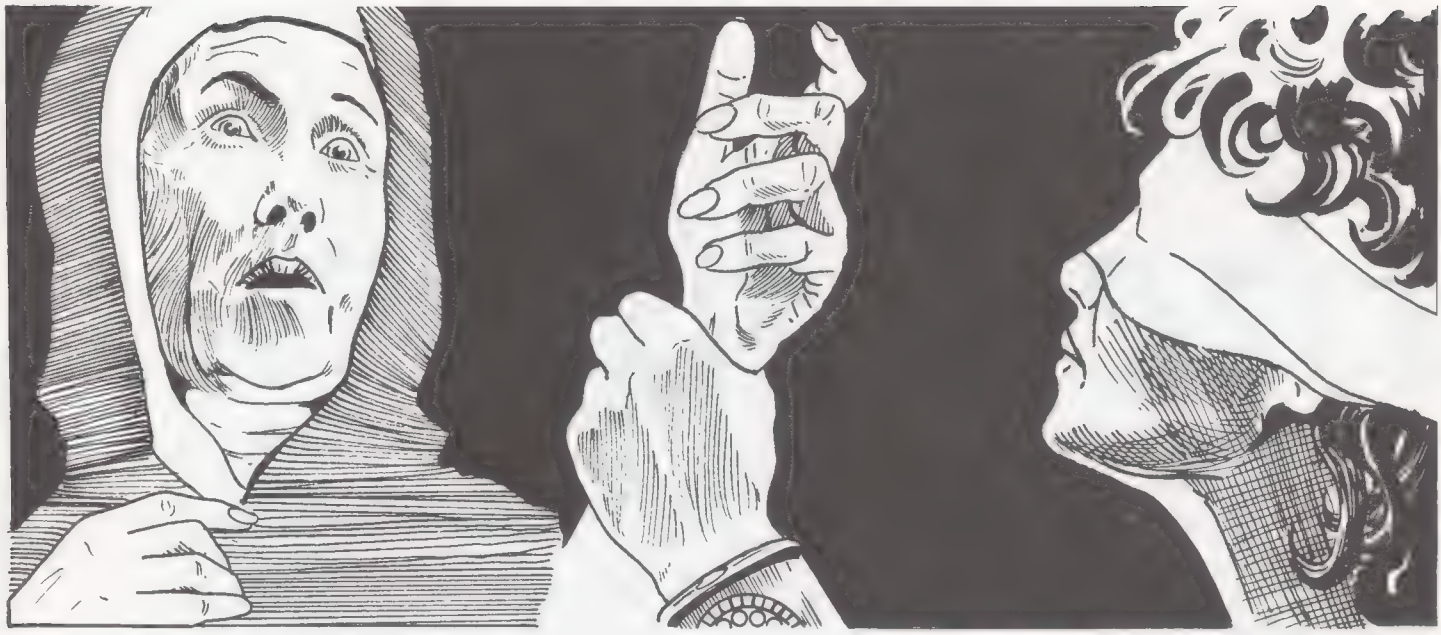
Twelve-year-old Gara swung again and again at the bells, each strike strong and precise. "Good, excellent," called the old trainer, Carak. "At this rate, you will exceed even your own mother."

Fourteen-year-old Gara stood in the doorway, tears threatening to break through her tight control, as she again watched her mother dress for the arena. This would be Isa's last fight. Gara felt it in her bones, knew it as she'd known about old Carak's heart last spring. She ached with the need to tell her, but couldn't get the words past her tightening throat. Telling her wouldn't change anything, but it might alter her performance and make the death blow Gara saw less quick, so she kept silent. Isa turned and signed victory for the last time. Gara returned it, somehow managing to smile.

Nineteen-year-old Gara stood in the center of the arena, her bloody sword raised and her foot on the chest of her dead opponent — Freedom Challenge met. She matched the gaze of her master and held it as he declared her release: the same master who'd sent her mother into the ring time and again until she no longer returned. Hate burned in her mind as he recited the formal words that made her a free citizen. She'd lowered her sword and turned when he clutched his chest in pain and slumped over in his chair. It was later, in the slave compound as she packed what few things she now owned, that she learned he was dead.

Gara's mind swam and tumbled its way to a fuzzy consciousness. She lay still as her head cleared more, taking in all she could of her surroundings without giving away her lucid state. She could feel bandages across her eyes, impossible to open them. The battle came back to her, and she remembered the blow to her skull. By her own calculations she should be dead. Mercenary's luck, she supposed. But where was she?

She was lying in a bed, that was plain. Strange, since the camp healer's tent had none. And where was the battle noise? She strained her ears but heard only a distant and indistinguishable blend of sounds. And closer, soft breathing. Someone was beside her. Asleep? Impossible to tell. A guard? Surely her employer's enemies would not have bound her wounds so carefully or put her anywhere but the floor of a crowded cell. She was not high enough in rank to be of any importance to them.



Artwork by Damien Willich

She knew how to fight and did so. Secrets were given to others.

She listened carefully for several more minutes. The breathing remained steady and quiet, no other movement, so she decided to venture a hand to her face to check the extent of her injuries.

Her hand would not move. She felt the straps restraining both arms, and her legs too. An unfamiliar fear shot through the pit of her stomach. She'd been a warrior more years than she cared to count and faced battle death a thousand times over; but to be captured, blind, and unable to move... Never had she felt so totally helpless.

She took a deep breath, forcing down the surge of panic. She strained carefully against the straps. They wouldn't loosen. On second thought, she was surprised at how comfortably they'd been placed. If she hadn't moved she wouldn't have noticed them. Then she heard movement beside her.

"You are awake," a woman's voice addressed her. She sounded older than Gara by many years, but the voice was soft with its age rather than harsh.

"Good, good," the woman continued and lay her hand on each of Gara's cheeks, then briefly slipped it under Gara's neck.

"Ah!" the unseen presence proclaimed. "The fever's broken now. Here, let me loosen the bonds. You were quite a handful in that fever of yours; we feared you might harm yourself."

Gara felt the restraints lifted, first off her legs, then her arms. Loosed, she sat up quickly, grabbing the older woman's wrist in a grip that barely kept from breaking it. Then her head began to spin violently.

"No, no, no," the other woman said in gentle admonishment. Gara could feel no fear in the woman, something that surprised even her dull and dizzy senses.

"You must not get up so quickly," the woman continued. "You are not yet ready." Her voice was full of concern, confusing Gara even more. "Here, lie back again."

Gara released her hold, unable to remain upright. The woman eased her back down on the bed.

"Who are you?" Gara managed to ask after the spinning slowed. Her voice cracked with disuse.

Silence. Then, "A helper. We serve the Goddess Iole, Mother of the Dawn, and help all who come to our door."

"But how did I come here? I don't remember being able to walk."

"You weren't. You were found on the field and brought here."

"Who won?"

"The war? Does it matter so? It is over and you are here."

"But where is this place? It sounds very large. But there were no large structures near the battlefield."

"So many questions!" she exclaimed, fussing with Gara's blanket and tucking her in like a small child. "You should rest now. Surely your questions can wait until you are stronger." The woman touched Gara's cheek lightly.

Gara wanted to protest but felt her brain fogging over again.

"Yes," the invisible woman soothed, "sleep now, rest, rest..." The words faded into the dark.

Gara swam back to the surface, fighting her way up as though through quicksand. Battle dreams and long forgotten memories faded, returning to the void she'd long ago banished them to. Once more she lay there, blind but awake, and listened. This time no sounds seemed near her. She raised her hands a little and let out a slow, relieved breath, finding them free this time. She touched the bandages. They covered her head and face down to her nose. She pressed gingerly along her forehead, locating the wound that should have killed her. It stretched from the middle of her forehead to below her right temple by the feel of it. The sword must not have hit true or it would surely have split her skull.

She pushed herself ever so slowly up onto her elbows. Her head remained quiet so she brought herself carefully upright. A dull ache began but her equilibrium stayed, so she ventured one leg over the edge, then the other. She sat for a moment, listening and making sure she wouldn't topple over again.

She felt along the edge of the bed as she sat there. The bed was large. It had a thick wooden frame and was higher than she'd expected. She eased herself to the floor, and her bare toes sank into the deep pile of a luxurious fur rug.

What kind of place is this? With wooden beds and carpets and healers who don't immediately ask for payment and the name of your employer?

She turned and rifled through the blankets for any sign of her clothing. Nothing. Just the undertunic she wore. The room was chilly, so she wrapped the blanket about her shoulders. She felt her

way toward the headboard. It was elaborately carved. The luxury puzzled her. She extended her arms and spread her hands out before her, one high and one low. She took several careful steps before her fingers encountered the cool stone of the wall. It was wide, and smooth with age and use, and in her mind she envisioned a massive keep surrounded by a tall, stone wall.

But there were none near the battlefield, she thought. *Where am I?*

Footsteps and the sound of a latch caught her attention, and she turned toward the sound. Two sets of footsteps entered.

"I told you she would be up and walking," said the voice of her caregiver.

"Yes," said a new voice. "You are feeling better, child?"

Did Gara imagine a smile in that silken voice? She felt compelled to trust, as though she'd known this woman all her life.

"My head aches," she replied slowly, trying hard to regain the suspicious nature that had kept her alive this long, "but at least it is still attached." Both older women chuckled softly. "Thank you for your help."

"You are most welcome, but the thanks are unnecessary. It is the Dawn Mother's work we do and gladly. I am Aurell, the High Priestess here, and I believe you have many questions."

"Y- yes, I do."

"Come, let us talk. Galene, bring her some breakfast. She must be famished." Gara heard the caregiver leave. "Come, child, sit."

Gara moved across the room toward the voice, finding a stuffed chair by the hearth. The High Priestess stirred the coals and added several pieces of wood until it blazed warm before them. Gara listened to the woman's movements until she heard her seat herself in an equally soft chair across from Gara.

"Now then," the woman said, "what do you wish to know?"

Gara paused so the questions wouldn't all tumble out at once and tried to order her thoughts. "Where am I?" she asked finally.

"The convent of Iole, Mother Dawn."

"You are all priestesses?"

"We all serve Our Lady in whatever office we are able to."

"Where is this place?"

"Roughly two days' ride east of the field where you were found."

Gara's mouth dropped open. How could she have survived such a journey?

"By the Grace of our Good Mother Dawn, many things are possible."

"But why me? I am only a fighter and of no importance to anyone."

"All are important to Our Mother Iole. It is Her will which brought you here." Aurell did not continue about that. "Ah, here is Galene now. We will talk again after you have eaten."

A table was pulled in front of her and the most tantalizing smells reached Gara from the tray they placed before her. Gara had thought eating blind would be difficult but she quickly devoured the sweet breads, eggs, and fruit. Even the water tasted wonderful to Gara's deprived senses. She couldn't remember a better meal in her whole life.

After she'd finished Gara saw Aurell smile. No...she imagined it, how could she see with her eyes covered?

"Are you better now? How does your head feel?"

"Yes, much better. When can the ban-

Artwork by Damien Willich

dages come off?"

Aurell considered a moment, then reached over and lightly touched Gara's head.

"Three more days, I think."

"Will..." Gara paused and took a deep breath. "Will I be able to see?'

Aurell sat back in her chair and smiled again.

"Oh yes," she said with a strange note in her voice that puzzled Gara. "You will see better than you ever have."

Gara let out the breath she'd been holding. Fighting was all she knew and if she were blinded... She'd seen crippled, former mercenaries on city streets. Proud men and women brought to degradation, begging or selling their bodies when they could no longer sell their swords. She'd sworn to take her own life before she ever lived like that.

Gara and Aurell talked frequently over the next three days, though she was sometimes puzzled by the answers the older woman gave. Aurell's voice gave no hint of her years, yet Gara pictured her as being even older than Galene. She supposed it was her quiet, confident manner that made her think that.

She was allowed short walks at the start, which gradually became longer. At first she thought it strange that they never took her hand, but rather walked just ahead of her, apparently trusting her to follow their voices and footsteps, though they were often silent. She was getting very good at it by the third day and had a reasonable idea of what the Convent's layout was.

She was sitting in the garden after the midday meal when Aurell and Galene came to her. Gara looked toward them as they walked silently up.

"Well, you found the garden by yourself today," Galene said in greeting.

"Good afternoon, Galene, High Priestess." Gara nodded to each. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," Aurell assured her. "I am pleased to see it."

"It is time to remove the bandages, Gara," Galene said.

Gara smiled. It was amazing how much she'd begun to smile lately.

"Can we do it here?"

"Here is fine," said Aurell, sitting down beside Gara as Galene began unwrapping cloth. After the last bandage was pulled away, Gara slowly opened her eyes, then froze.

"I am still blind!" she half screamed as wild terror flooded through her. "You said I would see but I'm blind!"

Aurell grasped Gara's hands firmly and she felt her panic ebb a little.

"You have *never* been blind. I said you would see, not that your eyes would be saved. Think, child. Do you not see me? Do you not see the flowers that surround you? Do you not know the shape of the convent?"

Gara calmed, distracted from her terror.

"I... I don't understand."

"You have a gift, child. One you have never realized you had, though it has aided you your whole life. You have even killed with it. Your slave master did not die by accident the day you were freed."

Gara was taken aback.

"How did you know this? I told you nothing of my years as a gladiator."

"Our Lady has watched over you for many years until circumstances could bring you to Her. It was She who suspended time itself so that you could be brought safely to us. And since you first awoke, have you not seen, in your mind, this convent, us, the gardens?"

"I...can imagine...but..."

"You do not imagine, you *see*, all that surrounds you. Where is Galene now?"

Without thinking Gara pointed behind Aurell.

"How did you know that? She made no sound moving there."

"I...can...see her," Gara said hesitantly. "But I am only a mercenary. Without eyes..."

"Without eyes you must seek another calling," Aurell said gently. "Perhaps even the one you were meant for all along."

This time, Gara *knew* the High Priestess smiled.

❧

Sandra C. Morrese is 31, married, and has two children, plus two dogs, one cat, and four guppies. She says, "writing is what I do, no other jobs (except the aforementioned hubby, kids, and animals)...And as with most of us still struggling, I'm chipping away at my first novel. I'm also fannishly involved as an officer in the now 50-year-old National Fantasy Fan Federation, publish a fanzine for the Cherryh's Khemeis Fan Group. I love cons which I attend whenever time and finances allow, at which you can find me sometimes on and sometimes at panels and often in the filk room."

Damien Willich was one of the principals in the artists' group Northern Lights, and is based near Seattle. This is his first appearance in *FANTASY Magazine.*

READ ME

The Fourth Street Fantasy Convention (the only convention I know of which has a copy of the Oxford English Dictionary in the con suite, complete with its magnifying glass) has a reading list of books which are mentioned repeatedly by panelists. The progress report says, "...having read some of them would give you a fuller understanding of what the panelists are talking about. The laws of perversity will, however, operate here as elsewhere: if you read half the list, the panelists will talk about the other half; if enough of you read the entire list, nobody on a panel will mention any of the books at all." In any case, it looks like interesting reading for fantasy lovers, so here's the list:

John Gardner, **ON MORAL FICTION** and **THE ART OF FICTION**

C.S. Lewis, **AN EXPERIMENT IN CRITICISM** and **THE DISCARDED IMAGE**

Aristotle, **POETICS** (many translations available; Golden and Butcher are both highly thought of)

Dorothy Hartley, **LOST COUNTRY LIFE**

Donald W. Engels, **ALEXANDER THE GREAT AND THE LOGISTICS OF THE MACEDONIAN ARMY** (not really recommended except to history fanatics and people who want to write about pre-industrial societies without making embarrassing mistakes)

Caroline Spurgeon, **SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGERY**

Ursula K. Le Guin, **THE LANGUAGE OF THE NIGHT** and **DANCING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD**

Joanna Russ, **HOW TO SUPPRESS WOMEN'S WRITING**

Bruno Bettelheim, **THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT**

Samuel Delany, **THE JEWEL-HINGED JAW** and **THE STRAITS OF MESSINA**

E.M. Forster, **ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL**

Frederick Turner, **TEMPEST, FLUTE AND OZ**

Alice Miller, **THE DRAMA OF THE GIFTED CHILD**

The Miracle Child

by Alethea Eason

As she listened and soothed the child, she saw herself twenty years earlier, sweating and exhausted, her ears straining to hear the cries of her own child. There was the brief sight of a pale body wrapped in a sheet and carried out of the room. She remembered her own cries. And though friend and kin had told her there would be other children, she knew differently.

Ruby found this baby squalling, naked and red faced, in the bracken under an oak tree. She appeared to be about a year old and screamed louder as Ruby picked her up. The child was covered with bites, the welts dark and swollen. Ruby carried the child back to the trail and found a spot where the clay soil was loose. She emptied some water from her canteen into a handful of the dirt, then rubbed it over the child's body. The wailing eased into a mild weeping.

She removed some oak leaves tangled in the child's dark hair, its strands twisted around the serrated edges.

"We'll have to cut some of these out," she said. The baby began to suck on a couple of her fingers. "Let's get you back and feed you and find out where you belong."

The wind shifted through the trees and spoke in a voice Ruby had trained herself to ignore. She had the old sensation of being watched, but discounted it and headed for home.

Ray Henderson watched his wife carry the baby up the road. He stood at the gas pump in front of their store and wiped his hands on a dirty rag, shaking his head.

"Ruby, you've brought home a lot of things during our marriage, but this beats all."

Ruby smiled. "She was sitting out in the middle of nowhere, just a- bawling. Didn't know what else to do but to bring her here."

Ruby walked across the gravel in the store's driveway and stood by Ray. She was as tall as he, big-boned.

"She's hungry. Why don't you go into town and see if anybody's heard something about her while I feed and wash her? I'll dress her up in some of the clothes we have on hand."

"I might be hungry, too," he said.

"Dinner will be ready when you get back," she said, carrying the baby past the screen door of the store. She walked through the room and went into the kitchen in back. She ran water into the sink, waiting for it to get warm enough for the baby to bathe. She didn't know why she was crying.

The screen door slammed and Ray's footsteps followed her into the kitchen. She wiped her face quickly.

Ray stood in the doorway. The left side of his face, the one with the scar, was turned away from her. "Don't get attached," he said.

"She's not a puppy dog." Ruby tested the water and lowered the baby into the sink.

"If they can't find the parents, you'll want to keep her. We're too old for that, Ruby."

He walked back through the house. She heard the door slam and the sound of the truck pulling away.

The baby found the wash rag Ruby had thrown in the sink and put it in her mouth.

"Would you like to be my little girl?" Ruby asked. She took the rag away from the child and began to wash her face gently. "What a pretty face you have under all that dirt."

The baby began to sob again.

"Hush now, child," Ruby said softly. "You got a home, if you need one."

No trace was found of where the little girl came from. Ruby was told she would be taken from her and made a ward of the state, despite her request to keep her. Then, without warning, there was a telephone call. A decision was made to allow the Hendersons to adopt to prevent more disruption in the child's life. Ray said nothing, one way or another, and for once Ruby was glad for his silence.

Jamie rode papoose-style on her mother's back until she was old enough to walk on her own, as Ruby combed the woods. She searched for the plants her grandmother had taught her to find. There was more to search for in those days. The wood had extended ten miles to the south. Now, on top of the ridge, Ruby could see where the line of trees ended.

Ray didn't understand, few people did anymore. But there were those who did,

Artwork by James Balkovek

and they still sought her help. Her grandma was a granny woman, midwife. Ruby also delivered children when there was no money for doctors, or when a friend wanted her close at hand. She had gone all the way to Evansville, driving their rusty Buick, to get her training.

Ruby was on her knees, carefully leaning across a spray of poison oak. Her knife was in her hand, and she whittled away at the bark of the slippery elm. At the same time she watched Jamie sitting on a rock ten feet away, her feet dangling in the creek.

"When we get home I'll grind this into a powder and put it in a jar. When you get a sore throat then we'll mix it with honey and make a tonic and you'll feel better."

Jamie kicked the water wildly in response. "I'll never get a sore throat, Mommy."

"The child's probably right," Ruby thought to herself. The only time Jamie became ill was when she had gone with her to Evansville to visit a friend from training. When Jamie had trouble breathing, she turned the car around and headed home. Within an hour after their return, Jamie recovered.

A jay landed on a nearby rock and the girl screamed in delight.

"I don't know who makes a bigger commotion, you or that bird," Ruby said as she stood up, pouring the bark into a paper bag.

"I know who, Mommy. You do." Jamie ran up and reached for her mother.

"You're too big to be carried," Ruby said. She reached for her basket, then stopped and picked her daughter up despite her words. A man emerged from the shadows of the trees. He had auburn hair, darker than the strands of red that escaped under Ruby's hat. Like her, he was tall, but he seemed to stoop a little. She realized he was nodding to her. Her hand, concealed in her skirt pocket, relaxed on her knife handle.

"You've taken good care of her," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Ruby wanted to run but he blocked her way. She didn't want to turn and go farther back into the hills. She gripped Jamie harder.

"We had to hide her. You found her a mile back by the large oak."

Ruby was silent.

"She doesn't take after you. She looks like her mother."

"I'm her mother." Ruby's hand clenched the knife again. She set Jamie on the ground behind her.

The man walked toward her, reaching out for the girl. Ruby waited until he was close enough, then felt the knife lunging forward. She expected to feel the resistance of flesh, but there was no sensation. She grabbed Jamie with her free arm, hoisting her to her waist, and ran past him.

He called after them, "Come back, please. Just let me be with her."

Though the afternoon was warm, Ruby was shivering. She stood in front of the counter, breaking the twigs into small pieces. A pot of water was boiling on the stove. She threw the twigs in and dumped the contents of another bag in front of her.

Ray walked in from the store and went to the sink for a drink of water.

"It would be easier just to take an aspirin," he said.

Ruby looked at him. She couldn't tell if he was joking.

"So what's cooking now?" he asked, coming over to the stove.

"I'm making a tonic with some witch hazel," Ruby said.

"Well, hell, Ruby, we sell that stuff right here in the store," Ray said, shaking his head and heading out front again.

Ruby stepped out to the back porch. She was still cold. The sun felt good and she sat down on the steps, closing her eyes. She had been married over half her life. When she was seventeen, Ray's quiet nature appealed to her, but even then she had to guess what his feelings were.

There was the loss of their child, the inability to have more. There was the fire at Ray's brother's house. His brother had died, and Ray was badly burned. Upon his return from the hospital, the softspoken nature that she loved had turned into bitterness.

The heat began to seep into Ruby's skin, but she was still chilled at the bone. The meeting with the stranger frightened her. She wanted to talk to Ray about it, but was unable to.

Nothing in the man's manner was actually threatening, yet he wanted to take her child. She must have stabbed and missed, though she had been sure her aim had been true.

Ruby thought of her grandmother, and how she used to follow her as Jamie followed Ruby now. She remembered sitting quietly while her grandmother dug for ginseng, the 'sang, as she called it. It was once all over the hills in the shady spots, growing beneath the dogwood, growing where the sun never really shone. A melancholy had overtaken her. The forest had seemed to be telling her stories she couldn't quite hear. She told her grandmother.

Her grandmother stopped digging and looked at her seriously. "It's them haints trying to speak to you, Ruby. They know you're a tender child. What do they seem to be saying?"

"I don't know, Grandma. But it's like I'm a part of it."

Her grandmother looked worried and said, "Don't you ever come here alone, do you hear?"

Ruby shook her head. She had kept her promise until after her grandmother had died.

Ruby heard Jamie wake from her nap. Ruby was still frightened, but she knew she would return and try to find the strange man.

The next day, Ruby stopped at Lucille Watkins' house. Lucille was expecting her third child and wanted Ruby to be midwife. Ruby made it a point to stop by every few days. Today she asked Lucille to keep Jamie, telling her she needed some time alone and would return the favor. Lucille's children were fighting over a toy in the front yard and she smiled understandingly.

"I shouldn't be gone long, Lucille," Ruby said as she waved goodbye and hiked up the hill behind the Watkins' house.

She made her way cross-country until she got to the trail. She walked as quickly as she could to the creek and stopped where she had encountered the man. She sat on a tree stump until she felt his presence.

"You didn't bring her."

"No."

"Yet you came."

Ruby had no answer for that. She looked at him carefully. His eyes were dark green, liquid, the color of a pond. His clothes fit loosely and seemed to be made from a homespun fabric. She decided to take the offensive.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Seth."

"What do you want with Jamie?"

"She's my daughter."

"No!" Ruby protested, but she knew what he said was true. "How could you have left her like that?"

"She was young enough to be placed on your side. It was a desperate time."

Ruby felt herself growing angry. "Say something that makes sense."

"I don't know if I can do that," Seth

said. "I doubt you would believe anything I could say."

He knelt down and began to scrape away the carpet of leaves at the foot of the oak, revealing a single tendril of delicate fern, curled tightly in upon itself. Ruby squatted next to him, placing her hand on the trunk of the oak. Seth brushed his hand over the small plant. The tendril slowly unwound. Its leaves grew darker, and it uncurled completely, until its tip was well above the ground.

Seth stared at the plant as he spoke. "A long time ago, before cities, before civilization, human beings were connected with the natural world. There was an affinity that has been forgotten now." He looked at Ruby. "A few people still have a memory of this. I was pleased it was you who found my daughter."

Ruby was afraid, but found her eyes drawn to his. "Go on."

"In those days, what you just saw was commonplace. But when people grouped together, built walls to separate themselves from the world, this talent was forgotten except by the very few. These people were able to merge, transform themselves. Dryads, oreads, spirits of the forest. Have you heard of them?"

Ruby shook her head no.

"It doesn't matter. Only at one time my ancestors, and Jamie's — that is what you call her?"

"Yes."

"Our ancestors were remembered, if only in myths and stories. Now, even that memory is gone. We've evolved in such a way that we cannot be separate from the tract of land where we are born, and it depends upon our caring of it. There are only a few of us left in this wood, and our numbers are decreasing all over the world. When you found my daughter, the destruction of this wood was having a devastating effect on us. Her mother ceased to be, and I was afraid she would not survive. What I did, I did out of desperation, and in haste. The woods are her source. She belongs here."

"I'm not going to listen to any more of this. You want to take her away from me, but you're not going to do that."

"If she leaves the area, she will die. She can't have a life with you. I made a mistake, don't punish her for it."

Ruby thought of the trip to Evansville, and Jamie's reaction. Though she knew instinctively that what he said was true, she could not accept it. "I can't give her up."

"With me there are risks, too. But she could live hundreds of years if the rest of the wood survives. Can you deny her that chance? Or yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"I could bring you to me."

Ruby stopped breathing for a moment, unable to take in the meaning of his words. Slowly, they seeped inside her and she took hold of what he said, word by word, until she was filled with their significance, and with it, the need to take flight, to move, until the words became her body and flowed through her as blood.

"Bring her back," Seth told her. "You both belong here."

Artwork by James Balkovek

Seth's words echoes through her. Ruby lay next to Ray. His breathing was rhythmic. She tried to match the pace of her heart with it.

She knew she would return. But on her own terms. Seth could see Jamie, but he couldn't take her. She would never allow that. As far as his offer to her, she wouldn't believe it. He had filled her with a fanciful notion. When Seth spoke she longed for his words to be made real. She desired her body to blend into the wind and the leaves and the herbs she knew so well. She desired it without understanding why. But the real world was here, in this house. Jamie would certainly want to talk about the visit, though. She would tell Jamie it was a secret. They often played that game.

Ruby watched the store in the morning while Ray helped a neighbor fix his truck. Jamie played with pots and pans, tipping them on her head and running around the room in figure eights. She had to be quieted when customers walked in, and once was sent out of the room. She left screaming. Ruby almost decided not to go.

But as soon as Ray walked in, she picked up her basket and took Jamie by the hand.

"Ruby, this is the third time this week," Ray said. "There can't be anything left up there to pick."

"Lucille's time is almost here, Ray. I forgot the woundwort yesterday, and there are a few things I'm a bit short of."

"You spend too much time alone, Ruby. Isn't natural for a woman to be wandering up there all by herself."

Ruby resisted the temptation to ask why he never offered to come along.

"This will be the last time for a while, I promise."

Jamie was still out of sorts as they began their climb. She cried all the way to the creek.

"Jamie, stop that now. Do you hear me?" Ruby wiped her forehead with her sleeve. The day was too hot. She felt as cross as Jamie. "There's going to be a surprise."

Jamie kept crying, but now her weeping was forced.

"Hello, Jamie."

Both mother and daughter were caught off guard. Seth bent down and tried to hand her a doll carved out of wood. Jamie put her thumb in her mouth and leaned against her mother.

"Do you remember this?" He shook his head. "Of course you wouldn't."

Jamie reached out and took the doll. "I like it," she said.

Ruby leaned against a tree and watched. Jamie's hair was black and straight, unlike Seth's, but their profiles were similar. Their chins were both sharp, their cheekbones high, making their faces lean and angular.

Seth looked up at her. "Thank you," he

said.

They spent an hour together. Ruby left Seth and Jamie by themselves while she worked, staying close to them.

She was brushing the dirt from the roots of the last few plants she had picked when she heard Jamie scream. She looked around, saw no one, and was about to call Jamie's name when Seth shouted, "Over here!"

Ruby ran toward his voice.

They stood a few hundred feet from where she had been working. Jamie was crying quietly, clutching her doll. She ran to her mother and pointed at the animal.

The fox lay in a pool of blood. Its tongue was swollen and protruded from its mouth. Ruby could hear its breath, slow and obstructed. She saw the raw skin where it had attempted to chew through the leg above the trapped paw.

She took her knife from her pocket. "I'll put it out of its misery."

"No." Seth raised his hand and warded off her approach.

He bent down and placed his hand over the fox's paw. Somehow it slid from the trap. Seth picked the fox up, cradling it in his arms, and it stopped wheezing. The crushed limb was healed.

"He still needs care," Seth said. "I should go now. Jamie, I have to take the doll back. If I don't, by the time you get home, it will be gone. I'll bring it next time."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise." Jamie walked up and handed the doll to him. "Think of what I said, Ruby. I could bring you both to me. I want you here."

Ruby shook her head no but at the same time said to Jamie, "Remember, this is a secret. If your daddy knew, we couldn't come back. Do you understand?"

Jamie nodded. The look in her eyes made Ruby turn away.

They said goodbye again, and she took Jamie by the hand and turned toward home.

That night as Ruby tucked Jamie into bed, Jamie rose up and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck and kissed her. She whispered in Ruby's ear, "I like Seth. It's our secret, isn't it, Mommy?"

"Hush now, doll baby," Ruby whispered back. "Go to sleep."

Ruby did not return. She was afraid of walking into the wood with Jamie and never coming back. The forest pulled at her, and she longed to disappear within it. Because of this, she stayed close to home.

She spent the next week with the neighbor women picking plums, peaches, and blueberries, pitting and crushing, pulling out the large kettles, cooking and straining, mixing with sugar and pouring the mixtures into steaming glass jars. Then there were the green beans and cucumbers to attend to. The tomatoes to simmer and cook down. It was hot and sticky. It was always hot during canning time, days when dogs slept close to the house, under the shade of the eaves. The air was as thick as the syrup the women poured.

One night, it remained warm and muggy. Ruby sat in the rocker fanning herself. Jamie lay on the floor. They listened to Ray play guitar while the insects beat against the screen door. He could pick up any instrument and sift out a melody. The music softened him, and the house was at peace.

Then the music ended, and Ruby told Ray how lovely he played. She was met by silence. Jamie, asleep now, needed to be carried to bed. Ruby picked her up and took her off to her room. She heard thunder in the distance, and the first sprinkles of rain on the roof. She came to their room. Ray was already in bed. Ruby put her nightgown on, lay down next to him, and put her hand on his back. She felt the rough skin of the scar. He would not touch her. She knew that, and the words that had drowned inside of her emerged.

"More than just your body burned, Ray."

There was no response. She turned away from him.

The thunder stayed distant. In her dream, Ruby thought the storm broke overhead. She then realized someone was banging on the door.

Ed Watkins held a flashlight when she opened the door. He didn't need to say anything.

"I'll be ready to go in just a bit, Ed. Come in and get out of the rain."

By the time they arrived at the Watkins', Lucille was advanced in her labor.

"Why didn't you send him before?" Ruby asked.

"Didn't see the need, Ruby," Lucille said.

Ruby sat on the bed and felt Lucille's stomach. "My granny said that in the old days, they'd put a knife under the bed to cut the pain. Figure we ought to try it?'

Lucille tried to smile. "I'm willing to go along with anything right now."

By morning the baby was born. Lucille

Artwork by James Balkovek

was young and healthy, and things had gone smoothly. Ed had fetched Lucille's mother, and when Ruby was sure everything was all right, she left, saying she'd be by later in the day.

The rain was still falling as she stepped outside and breathed its fragrance. The air was lighter than it had been for days, and Ruby's spirits lifted.

She turned up the hill to the woods. The sky above her was indigo, but a seam of light was breaking behind her. The drone of insects rose, then stopped suddenly.

Once on top of the ridge she rested, catching her breath. She looked down at the Watkins' farm. One of the children was crying. Ruby thought of Jamie, her wild one, her joy, her daughter — and Seth's.

She hurried through the wood. When she came to the trail she began to run. In her haste, she tripped, skinning the palms of her hands. She froze on her knees in the dirt and looked as the blood pooled in tiny drops on the surface of her skin.

She lowered her head, resting it on her arms, and closed her eyes. She felt vacant. The rain had stopped. A mosquito whined close to her ear. She brushed it away and stood up, waiting.

She thought she saw a change in the shadows ahead of her.

"Seth?"

Before she had a chance to hear an answer, she was grabbed roughly and spun around. Ray's fingers tore into her shoulders. His face was contorted.

"Ed said you left the house a while ago. You were gone so long I carried Jamie over to the Watkins' to see what the matter was. She's still there, asleep." Ray's voice was thick. Ruby sensed his trying to control himself. "I knew where I'd find you. I don't want you up here. It ain't natural, you talking to yourself like some crazy woman."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Ruby said.

For a moment, Ruby thought she would explain, but Ray would be convinced she was crazy. He took her by the arm. She looked over her shoulder and saw nothing.

"You're not coming up here again," Ray said. He pulled her forward. Nothing more was said. When they reached the house, Ruby walked up the steps to the kitchen and opened the door. She was light-headed from lack of sleep and numb from the confrontation with Ray. The room, familiar as it was, felt unreal. The walls and cupboards spun around her. She crossed the room and leaned against the sink, grasping the counter tightly. She looked out the window for a long moment.

"I'll go fetch Jamie," Ray said.

The door slammed. Ruby's panic didn't subside. She walked down the hall, paused at Jamie's door, then opened it. Seth and Jamie were standing by the window, hand in hand. Jamie held the doll.

"You didn't bring her back," Seth said.

"I couldn't."

"Come with us, back into the wood."

"Mommy?"

Ruby crossed the room and knelt next to Jamie. She tried to brush the hair out of her face. Her hand only brushed through air.

"You have her, then?" Ruby asked. "How can you take her from me?"

"She will die if she stays here."

"No. I wouldn't let that happen."

"I'm taking her now. Are you coming?"

Ruby tried once more to touch her daughter. When she failed, her decision had been made.

Ruby heard Ray rush into the house, and turned her head toward the noise. She was alone in the room when Ray entered. His face was ashen.

"Jamie's disappeared."

"She's gone."

Ray thought she was asking a question. "They don't know what happened. She was there, then she vanished. Ed's looking for her now. I'm going to round up some people. Will you be all right?"

"Yes," Ruby said.

"Ruby, I'm sorry. If anything happens to her..."

"She'll be fine."

"Are you all right?" Ray's eyes examined her. She saw his concern.

Ruby stood up. "Yes. Go, you're wasting time."

Ray hesitated a moment longer, then left the room. Ruby walked to Jamie's bed and touched the quilt.

"She'll be fine. I promise."

The creek was only a thin line of water. The rocks on its banks were marked with lines that showed where the water had been, and where it would rise again. Ruby felt Seth near her, and spoke to him.

"I have to stay, at least for now. It's up to me to take care of this wood for you. Someday, once I know the wood is safe, I'll come. You protect Jamie from the dangers on your side."

The sun was in her eyes. Ruby squinted, and the light broke into a myriad of rays like a small star. She could see nothing, but she had expected as much.

❧

Alethea Eason has been writing for many years and has had several poems published in small press magazines, but this is the first *story* she's had published. She lives in Lake County, California, with her husband, Bill, and their two dogs, Joey and Opal. She writes, "we're currently building a cabin on forty acres above Clear Lake. It's miles from the nearest town so we'll be using solar power. We hope to move there in a year or so. I work as a reading specialist at an elementary school. Much of the inspiration for 'The Miracle Child' came from living in a rural environment and taking long walks in the woods."

James Balkovek runs Black Eagle Productions, a graphics firm in Northern California. He has worked as an art director for a department store chain but prefers free-lance assignments. His work has appeared often in *FANTASY Magazine.*

Artwork by James Balkovek

Artwork by Lissanne Lake

Wizard's Rest

by E R Stewart

As the dark of the moon approached, Calexidon grew uneasy. Swirling his robes, he paced the dank halls of his tower wringing his hands in distress. Never before had the moon's dark phase come so unwanted upon him. Usually he was ready for his monthly day and night of rest, and usually he left his many spells simmering, his many conjurations crackling, with something akin to relief.

"I hate this," he roared, as demon spirits cringed away into deeper shadow. The glow from Calexidon's face intensified. Sparks flew from the tip of his long, pointed nose, and his eyes glittered with barely suppressed anger.

Snapping his fingers, he caught his staff as it fell from empty air. Slashing the thick, gnarled pole from side to side, he clattered his way in a rush up the spiral that led to his highest, most powerful tower room. The door vanished as he strode toward it, and materialized behind him as strong and stout as ever.

Calexidon screamed, "This shall not be," and stirred a bubbling cauldron of orange and yellow broth with the tip of his staff. Writing then in the air, he drew glowing figures and abstract shapes from geometries only guessed at by lesser wizards. The forms and shapes hung in the air, gradually fading, gradually falling toward the floor as they disintegrated. He drew them thrice, then turned widdershins and danced a manic dervish whirl of angry defiance.

"Hear me, Time," Calexidon bellowed, his resonant baritone rattling dishes, flasks, and retorts on the shelves that lined the walls. "Hear me, Time, and know that I command you." He raised both arms, and let the staff hang in the air before him. His tall, spare frame stood draped in robes shot through with magic, vibrant threads. Living silk writhed among the plainer wool, amidst the warp and woof, binding the wizard's constant garment to worlds existing beyond the sight of all but a very few.

"Hear me, Time, and allow me a lengthened day," Calexidon commanded, his voice becoming harsh as the air in the room began hissing forth between stones. As other atmospheres pushed their way into the room, as other airs surrounded the wizard, lightning flashed around him, and halos of power radiated forth from his clenched fists.

"Today must turn tomorrow when,
"Permission given once again
"Escapes my lips, eludes my ken,
"And matches minutes span to mortal men."

And with a final flourish of complex motions and a spin of rapid dance, Calexidon completed his attempt to make that day before the dark of the moon last a little longer.

He fell back, bashing his head against

Artwork by Lissanne Lake

the stone walls, which now dripped a sticky, sweet-smelling ichor condensed when the foreign atmospheres receded. Calexidon raised a hand to his rippled brow and sighed a long, pained sigh. He rose and snatched his staff from the air where still it hovered, as patient as a trusty dog.

Striding across the room, Calexidon checked the small furry animals he kept in golden cages by the windowstone, which let in light as if through ice, reluctantly and dimly. The animals cowered back to far corners, and Calexidon laughed and snapped fingers to feed them some carrots. "It's fine," he told them, voice soothing now.

And then he noticed the small furry shape lying at the center of one of the cages. "Marcaul, no," he said. Waving a palm over the cage thrice, the wizard reached through the bars and lifted the small limp thing. He lifted it for a closer look, sniffed it, turned it over in his palm, then shed a single tear. "Marcaul, you little hopeless fool," he said, suddenly slapping his palms together, obliterating the tiny dead thing in a flash of crimson light.

Angry again, Calexidon touched the top of his head and sank through the floor. He came down in a room below, in which lay a huge round carpet, the patterns of which changed continually. He gazed at the patterns, which were dull and earthen in color, complex and lacy in pattern.

Having muttered a curse or a spell, he leaped as high as he could, using his staff to push himself higher off the floor. He jumped into the middle of the carpet, and as demon spirits snapped the hems of his garment and nibbled the ends of his long silver hair, the wizard exploded into the carpet and vanished.

He saw once again the slash of motion, the dizzying blur of tiny lights as if stars raced by too quickly to see, and then he found himself lying supine beneath a huge old oak, soft moss under him and a pot of mead or ale to one side.

It was the Place of Rest, the Grove of Peace, the spot chosen from all such lacunae in all the forests of all the worlds. Sitting up, Calexidon looked around and saw several other wizards, some in simple togas, others in leather jackets, chrome chains, and spiked boots, and still others in uniforms. He saw men, women, children, animals, and other things represented, but he knew all were wizards, and all were resting quietly, enjoying the small period of time when their powers froze in static or dropped away like scales or otherwise became inaccessible to them.

Every wizard had to rest, each for an individual length of time, each for a separate and personal reason.

Standing, Calexidon snapped his fingers. Nothing happened. He tried harder, and this time his hat appeared. Shaped like a bent cone, it was half as tall as he, and bore many magical signs and symbols, as prescribed by the Algerian mages of yore to which his guild owed allegiance.

The performance of conjuration in Wizard's Rest alarmed some of the wizards and alerted others. Some fled, simply blinking out and suddenly gone. Others put forth fearful questions.

Calexidon donned his hat and stood for a moment regarding the others, and then he said, "I have demanded of Time a suspension, to allow me to warn you."

At once utter silence filled the clearing, and the night-like shadows that covered the place intensified even as the warm golden glow of the myriad illuminating acorns flared to make Calexidon visually clear and distinct. In a loud voice, Calexidon said, "I have discovered a plot to destroy this place."

"Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" "How?" and "Why?" the others asked, some voices frail like gulls heard from afar, other voices powerful like the rumbling in the rocks during continental earthquakes.

Calexidon reached upward, his arms seeming to lengthen. He managed, with a grunt and a scowl of effort, to reach the tip of his conical hat, and then he traced downward with his fingertips the length of the hat, and his hands came away lighted with an orange/green fire. Touching his hands together, he carefully pulled them apart, and the orange flame widened and flattened like a square bubble between his palms even as the green flames became a frame.

Pictures formed in the orange flames. Only wizards could perceive such pictures, but only wizards were present. "No," some gasped, while others muttered angrily.

"Yes," said Calexidon, "Xoreal and his Cavern of Sorcerers have decided to eliminate us once and for all."

Figures like underground crows, like crocodile giraffes, like reptilian maidens and fanged Princes aflight on leathery wings, whirled and dipped in the orange flames: sorcerers all, and each one sworn in enmity against the wizards, who served mankind rather than chasing down

magic's darker threats and promises.

"They have resented our restraints for eons," Calexidon shouted, willing his voice to reach far back into the dimensionless shadows surrounding Wizard's Rest. "We must fortify this place and leave guards, and others of us must carry the fight to the Sorcerers no matter where they hide. No world must be spared our search, and no Sorcerer must escape our scrutiny."

Even as he spoke, some of the more shadowed oaks that stood farther from the light of their presence began a soundless ballet, hardening, turning to stone, and falling to form a wall. "They mean to strike Wizard's Rest when most of us are here," Calexidon told his colleagues, his arms trembling now as if the images of the sorcerers were growing heavy.

"But have you brought magic here?" an ancient wizard in black silk kimono asked, his almond eyes alight with concern.

Calexidon shook his head, sending his mane of silver hair flying. "No magic is here that was not of this place from the beginning of Time," he said. "And none of us must betray that trust by bringing our own powers to bear."

All agreed at once, tradition strengthening their resolve. Finally, with a gasp of relief, Calexidon let the orange flame framed by green flames fall to the mossy ground, where it burned on for a few minutes before evaporating in an upward shower of blue sparks. Calexidon sagged; his wide shoulders slumped. He fell back and sat down hard. For a moment he held his face in his hands, breathing heavily.

A tiny creature no larger than a sprite approached him, its translucent body showing glimmers of cool ocean green and soft autumn yellow. It fluttered near his forehead and touched Calexidon with a tentative foot. He raised his weary gaze and, seeing the creature, smiled. "Ah, you've come."

Sounds like shimmery bells and melodic insectile squeals caressed the air as the creature answered.

Calexidon nodded. "Indeed, and yet none yet realize the danger. They're all so full of themselves, so arrogant. Defeat is a concept they've never entertained."

More ethereal sounds jittered the air.

Calexidon stood and leaned on his staff, which showed signs of scorching and splintering. He reached up and placed a single sharpened fingernail on the top of the tiny creature's head, whispered, "Fare well, and fight true," and then he squeezed shut his eyes and leaped up, pushing with his staff.

He flew from the round carpet and landed on his feet as deftly as any cat, as silently as any cat's shadow. Running from the room, he descended his tower and ignored the throng of demon spirits that swarmed around him. The fog of small beings thickened as he reached ground level.

The castle stood high on an obsidian cliff splashed by an emerald sea. As usual, a cyan sky with fluffy pale beige clouds domed the scene. Birds and other flying things fed along the shore or chased each other in primal games of deadly seriousness.

Calexidon hastened down a pebble path that curved from his tower around to the drawbridge where the dragon lay, sated and unimpressively fat and irrepressibly lazy. The wizard actually walked on its tail to get to the drawbridge, and when the dragon raised a bleary eye, it received a quick swat with the tip of the staff for its trouble.

Clumping across the bridge, which as far as Calexidon knew had never been raised, the wizard raised a hand in greeting to the pair of ceremonial portal guards, then walked through a shimmery waterfall into the main courtyard. As expected, he found the King's family in fashionable clothes, playing croquet, sipping tea, and gossiping while the King himself sat at a half-moon table devouring capons, bacon, mustard, salads, and chunks of fruit. "And what brings you to the festivities, wizard?" King Oligar asked, his happy, chubby face smeared with grease and juice and strawberry seeds.

"Danger, sire," Calexidon said. He cleared his throat.

"But you told me yesterday that you'd be gone today."

"And so I would have been, if I hadn't learned of a plot to strike at me, and others like me, during our most vulnerable times."

The King raised his eyebrows, then licked a few fingers and gazed out at his many children, his wife, and their faithful retainers. A moment of seriousness crossed his features; he realized that none of his happiness would be possible without wizards helping with the details. "Must an army be raised?" he asked, genuine pain in his tone.

"No, sire," Calexidon assured his mortal monarch. "One simple thing must be done."

"One thing only?"

Artwork by Lissanne Lake

"Yes, but a hard thing, your majesty." Calexidon leaned on his staff and closed his eyes. "Wizards serve humanity," he said, fatigue in his tone. "Sorcerers serve only themselves. We wizards keep them in check, and protect this world from their meddling, but no one can be on duty all the time."

"What must be done, Calexidon Magus Rex?"

The wizard paused, taken aback at hearing his full title. He knew the formality of the address indicated that the King understood how dire the situation could become, and he was grateful. Some wizards, after all, served drooling, flippant fools. Calexidon counted himself lucky.

The King frowned deeper at the hesitation and asked again, more urgently, "What must be done?"

And Calexidon told him, and the King stifled a sob as he stood, left his meal, and walked with the wizard into the royal chambers to prepare.

The proclamation stunned the villagers. BE IT KNOWN THAT THE KING IN HIS WISDOM HAS DECREED MAGIC TO BE A SUPERSTITION WHICH SHALL NO LONGER BE TOLERATED WITHIN THE KINGDOM, AND BE IT FURTHER KNOWN THAT ANYONE WHO CLAIMS TO HAVE MAGICAL POWERS SHALL BE TESTED AND, IF FOUND WANTING, BANISHED.

Knowing that Calexidon would never tolerate such mockery, the entire village walked up toward the castle, wanting to see what would transpire between their king and their wizard. They chattered, they speculated, and they trembled, but curiosity drew them onto the sward just outside the castle walls. Farmers began arriving as the sun descended into the sea, and wandering merchants, and carriers of messages; everyone in the kingdom headed toward the castle to see what would happen.

That night was like a festival, with barter, campfires, and dancing. Music played 'til dawn. People sang and children laughed and ran. Dogs barked and accepted fallen morsels as their due. Thieves had a field day, and sheriff's deputies pocketed fines without a second thought.

It was exactly the moment of dawn when the sun cleared the cairn atop Longbarrow Hill that Calexidon chose to make his dramatic appearance. A thunderclap drew all eyes to the ramparts of the castle's eastern wall, and a flash of lightning struck and exploded one of the stones. As thick black smoke cleared, there stood Calexidon, resplendent in shimmering rainbow robes, his hat no longer bent, and his staff seemingly made of liquid silver.

"Hail," he called, raising his arms to the people. "Is my magic, then, a fake, a sham, a trick of eye and heart?"

"Yes," came the defiant bellow at once.

The crowd, enthralled by the magic show, gasped and swivelled its collective gaze toward the southern end of the wall, where a portly figure stood wearing crimson and purple velvet robes and a simple golden crown.

"The King," part of the crowd said.

"A trick," the King cried, striding now toward the wizard, who had dropped his arms and turned to glare at his monarch as if enraged. "A trick, I say," the King repeated, and as he reached the wizard he stomped his foot, and at once a flash blinded half the crowd even as a thunderclap echoed across the sward. "Specially prepared black powder, nothing more," he called, tossing handfuls of the gritty granules down over the wall, where the closest members of the crowd took turns stomping it, making it flash and roar.

Calexidon took a step back then, and shouted, "And this?" And his silver staff rose before him and hovered over the crowd as the wizard's hands described complex arcs and whirls above his head.

The King laughed and drew his sword.

The people gasped again, and no person in the crowd moved so much as a throat muscle.

Stepping forward, the King slashed at the air before Calexidon's face, and the staff dropped. "You see?" cried the King. "I've cut his slender threads and destroyed his illusion of magic. Wizard Calexidon Magus Rex, you are hereby banished."

Some in the crowd fell to their knees. Some bawled like babies wanting to be changed or fed. A few of the braver souls screamed encouragement to the wizard, as if unsatisfied by the kind of show it had turned out to be, but such voices quickly fell silent.

A loss of faith assailed the crowd, and Calexidon, drawing his robes about himself, marched off the parapets in a huff, obviously humiliated, obviously mortal and less than magical.

The King gave speech then to reasoned arguments and calm assurances, and although he spoke for an hour or more, no one in the crowd grew restless. His people heard him out, and understood that they had been set free that day. No longer would they allow their lives to be governed by a constant reference to a wizard's whims.

At the end of his great speech, King Oligar declared a holiday, and granted festival license to all who would celebrate with him an end to outdated, old-fashioned superstition.

Finally waving a farewell to his people, the King left the ramparts and descended to his private chambers. He went to his library, where the books he collected were lovingly preserved on oaken shelves. Sitting in his favorite chair beside the fireplace, he said, "Are you here, wizard?"

"I am here, sire," Calexidon said. "We did well today."

"Do you really think they're convinced?"

Calexidon chuckled. "Of course not, your majesty. They'll never stop believing in magic, at least a little. And that's as it should be."

The King popped some chocolates into his mouth and munched reflectively for a few moments. Finally he asked, "Will you have enough time, now?"

Calexidon stood straight and tall beside the staff. "As you can see, your majesty, I'm feeling much better already. Without the constant drain on my abilities and attentions, I can rest at will. No longer will I be at the mercy of the moon, either. As people learn to do for themselves, I'll be able to husband my powers and put them to more focused use."

The King nodded. "And what of the banishment?"

Calexidon jumped upward. He stayed suspended in the air and began to spin, his long blond hair, his long blond beard, and his shimmery rainbow robes flying outward until he became a swirling blur.

The King watched, delighted. He'd loved magic since childhood and never grew tired of such displays. Absently he tossed more candy into his mouth and slouched back comfortably, tired from his speech. The blur shrank, solidified, and became a tall, straight young man with dark hair, a saucy smile, and well-trimmed hair and mustaches. He was dressed in the height of fashion and leaned gracefully on an ebony walking stick tipped with silver. "Call me Ishmael from now on," said the being once known as Calexidon Magus Rex.

"And your rank?"

And Ishmael smiled. "Why, Minister of Advice, of course."

The two men chatted together until

late afternoon, and then they shared a meal. Finally Ishmael made his excuses and retired to his chambers in the guest wing of the castle.

That night a backwards wind blew out to sea, and at the exact moment when there was no one at all awake in the kingdom, Calexidon's tower crumbled and tumbled off the obsidian cliff into the emerald surf, where it dissolved into a beach that shimmered like a rainbow even on the darkest nights. No one ever figured out what happened to the dragon.

—shazam—

❧

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His credits include fiction, nonfiction, criticism, poetry, maps, cartoons, and photography in *FANTASY Magazine, Isaac Asimov's SF, SF REVIEW, REV-UP, Military Lifestyle, Family, Macon, Thrust/Quantum, The Mountaineer-Herald, Pennsylvania Angler, Life Today,* and *Cricket For Children.* He is a contributor to Baen Books' WAR WORLD anthology series, and has placed other stories with J.E. Pournelle & Associates for up-coming anthologies. He's currently finishing his third novel and is courting agents.

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Credo

by Jonathan Shipley

Kenda reared back to hit the B minor chord with her full weight. The chapel seemed to shake on its foundations as the chord blasted forth from the organ. Kenda's lanky body shook as the low pedal B rumbled through her chest.

She raised her hands from the keyboard. The wave of sound stopped. "Well?" she asked, tilting her head up toward the pipes above. "You still here or not?" There was an moment of silence, then reedy laughter drifted down from the upper ranks of pipes.

"You goat-faced she-whelp," the organ sang in a nasal stop. "Never get rid of me and —"

Kenda scowled and slammed her hands down on the console to drown out the words. Then she sat back on the bench, frustrated. Her arms and back ached from the nearly constant playing.

"Told you it wouldn't work," mumbled the bellows-boy sleepily. "Not that way."

"Quiet, Tadzo," she snapped. Did he have to keep saying that? She was trying every way she knew. She might not know much about demons, but it still seemed that sheer force of volume ought to expel the imp from the organ. Unfortunately, it wasn't working. She glanced at the little mechanical clock in the corner of the organ loft. Already past midnight. She'd been playing full volume for hours. No telling what the stableboys in the quarters next door were thinking by now. Or the good Fathers in the rectory. Hopefully they dismissed it as some extraordinary prelude for tomorrow's service.

Today's service, she corrected uneasily. It was already Sunday, and the sunrise mass was only a few hours away. She shuddered to think of the demon still in residence when the Prince-Bishop began the invocation.

"Again," she told the boy. Tadzo silently manned the organ's pump lever one more time. She watched him slump against the lever. This is cruel, she thought. He was so tired, he couldn't even keep his eyes open. But there was no other way. The organ was dead without someone at the bellows.

Kenda ran through a series of deafening chord changes, pulling out different stops every time she changed notes. Finally she let the sound die away. But not quite to silence. There was laughter under the dying echoes.

"Damn you, fiend!" she cried, shaking her fist at the upper ranks of pipes. But she had no more fight left. She was out of ideas and was almost as tired as Tadzo. So much for her position as Chapelmaster. Her very short-lived position. The Prince-Bishop had confirmed her appointment only because he was already committed in writing. He had assumed any candidate for the post would be a man and was less than pleased to find her otherwise. He would have no reservations about dismissing her for any minor incompetence.

Kenda slid off the high organ bench and shuffled to the balustrade overlooking the chapel proper. The smell of evergreen mingled with incense wafted up from below. The verger had finished hours ago. All was in readiness for the sunrise mass. It wasn't fair that an organ imp should be able to wreak such havoc on the service and on her future. "The organ has been out of use for several years," Monsignor had told her when she arrived two days ago. "It may need a few stout hymns to loosen its action." The action wasn't the problem.

Over the past day and a half she had been through every hymn in the hymnal and her entire repertoire of preludes and fugues. She'd kept telling herself that she was wearing down the imp's resistance and needed only a final marathon session to complete the expulsion. But now it seemed the only thing wearing down was her. Why hadn't the Collegium prepared her for this?

She picked up her woolen cloak from the railing and threw it around her shoulders. "I can't do it," she told Tadzo.

"Huh?" he mumbled back, opening one eye a crack.

"I can't get the demon out of the organ. It's useless to keep trying. Go get some sleep." The boy dragged himself toward the tiny spiral staircase connecting the loft with the nave below. He stumbled, barely caught the curved banister in time. The organ hooted with its trumpet stops, using up the last of the pump pressure.

Kenda scowled up at the pipes as she went to help Tadzo down the steps. Returning to the loft, she pulled out a sheet of parchment that bore the beginning scribbles of a prelude she had started

months ago. She turned it over and dipped her quill in the ink well that stood next to the music rack.

Dear Reverend Monsignor, she wrote. *It is with a sad heart that I must relinquish the position His Grace has been kind enough to offer me. Musically, I have much to offer the parish and the Prince-Bishop's court, but I am not equipped to deal with certain hostile influences that currently plague the chapel.*

She read back over the message. "What they need," she muttered, "is a magician, not a musician." The thought struck home. "Tadzo!" she yelled suddenly, looking down into the nave. The great front doors of bronze were too heavy for either her or the boy to move, and they always used the rear entrance through the vestry when the chapel was officially closed.

As she peered through the gloom, she could just make out his small form heading down the center aisle. "Tadzo, wait!" she called again.

Kenda barreled down the stairs and caught up with him halfway down the nave. "Didn't you tell me there was a Wise Woman in the village?"

"Used to be, Mistress," he mumbled. "But His Grace decreed that no one could believe in her anymore and her powers dried up."

"Why can't His Grace decree no imps in the church, too," she muttered. Then to Tadzo, "But she still lives in the village?"

The boy nodded. "At the end of Cobble Street. But she can't do anything, Mistress. Not anymore."

"But she may still know what to do," she answered, dragging Tadzo on toward the vestry. "You stay here," she told him. "I should be back within the hour and could need you again. Here. You can sleep in that corner by the door until I return." He was sound asleep before she was halfway across the room.

Stepping out of the chapel, she pulled her cloak closer around herself against the night chill and cut through the headstones of the surrounding churchyard. A low moan and the rattle of chains sent her scurrying to the main path. Safe, she thought with a shudder. She wasn't quite sure what was out there, but there had been incidents. Enough for the Prince-Bishop to decree that nothing in the churchyard had any substance to those faithful who stayed on the straight and narrow path. She suspected a metaphor, but the villagers believed it meant the stone pathway connecting the bronze doors to the outer gate. So that was what it had become.

Once past the churchyard gate, she made good time through the village streets. Not even the dogs were awake at that hour, and the silence made her own footfalls on the cobblestones seem all the louder.

There was no question about which hut on Cobble Street belonged to the former Wise Woman. Tadzo had said the end of the street, and one building was clearly at the end, separated by a good twenty yards from its nearest neighbor.

Kenda stepped up to the door and knocked. It struck her — belatedly — that this was a rude hour to call. But this couldn't wait until morning.

After two more raps on the door, it finally opened and a thin, elderly woman in a patched nightgown stared blearily out. "What's all this?" she snapped.

"Please, I'm the new Chapelmaster and need to ask—" "Chapelmaster!" the woman hissed. "Begone!"

The door slammed in her face. Kenda raised her hand to knock again. The former Wise Woman obviously bore a grudge against anyone associated with the Prince-Bishop, but this was too important to let drop. After a few minutes of pounding, the door finally creaked open again.

"Leave me in peace," grumbled the woman. "Or are you to torment me all night?"

"A thousand pardons," said Kenda. "I wish to torment no one. But I myself am being tormented by an imp in the organ case. I thought perhaps you..."

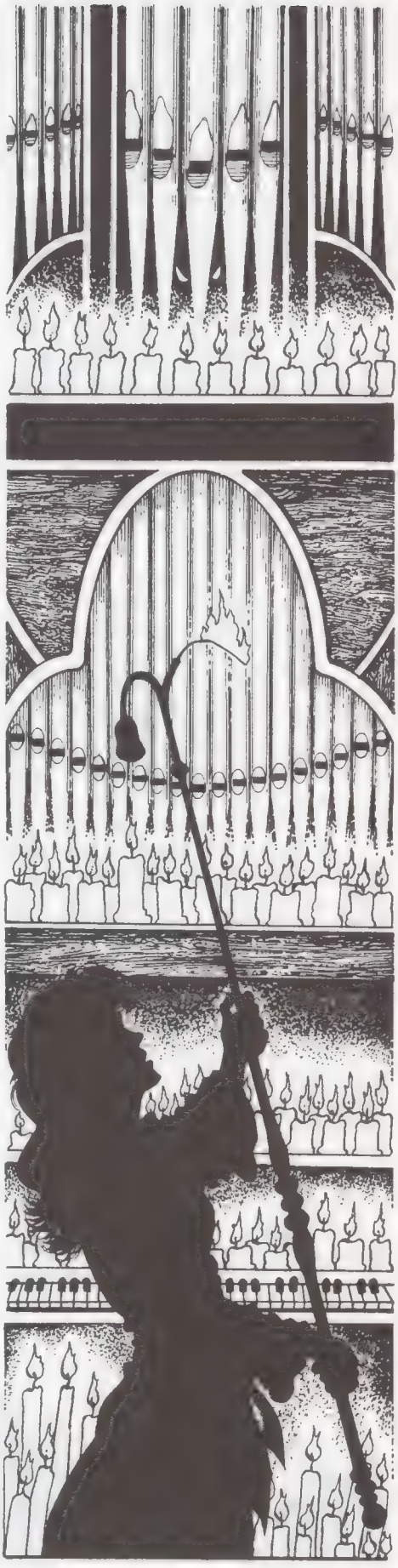
"I can do nothing. I am only an old woman."

"But you know about such things," Kenda insisted. "And with His Grace looking for any excuse to dismiss me..."

"His Grace, eh? Wanting to get rid of you, is he?" The woman's face turned suddenly sly. "Imps used to be child's play. Perhaps you should be asking yourself who believes in such things these days." The door closed again.

Kenda stood staring at it a moment. A lot of help that was. Would no one in this backwater village help her? Apparently not. She turned and trudged back to the church. There was nothing more to do except sign the letter of resignation. Coming here unwanted had been a mistake from the first. She'd been a fool to think mere talent and dedication were enough for this position. No, here you had to deal with imps and crazy women and self-righteous bishops.

Crossing the churchyard, she heard another moan from a nearby tombstone.



Artwork by Barb Armata

"Go away," she snapped in the direction of the sound. "No one believes you're anything but a pack of old toads anyway. Just fat, old toads."

The moan faded abruptly. She glanced around, startled by the sudden silence. If only the imp could be dismissed as easily. The thought persisted as she approached the vestry door. Why wasn't it possible? Kenda stepped inside, nearly stumbling over Tadzo's prone body. She stared at him in the flickering candlelight. Tadzo who believed in imps.

"Wake up," she said, shaking him by the shoulder. "I know how to do it."

The boy came slowly awake, yawning prodigiously. "You do? From the old Wise Woman?"

Kenda nodded. Partially true, she thought. "I've been approaching this all wrong. We need to try something else."

His eyes lit up. "An exorcism? With candles and everything?"

If that's what he believed would work... "Of course," she nodded. "Lots of candles." She began rummaging in the nearest drawer. "Help me find some."

He went to the far wall and pulled open the middle drawer. "These?" He held up a fat votive and studied it thoughtfully. "They're like little pipes," he said after a moment. "Each blessed candle is a pipe of the organ. When they're all lit, there'll be no room for the demon."

"That's right," nodded Kenda. No, not right, she thought a second too late. The organ had hundreds of pipes. But she didn't dare backtrack now that the idea was fixed in his mind. Shaking her head, she dug through the neatly folded vestments for more candles . She just hoped there were enough. Twelve ranks of a hundred-and-ten pipes each. She dug more frantically.

Many trips later Tadzo carried the last armload of tapers up the spiral steps to the organ loft. "That's all there are," he puffed, "including everything in the nave and transept. Think it'll be enough?"

"Yes," Kenda answered, with only a glance at the last armload. She had decided that it was going to be enough. She added more candles to the growing collection atop the console case, filling in the back rows where she had run short. "Done," she announced. "Start pumping."

Tadzo climbed up on the bellows lever, using his weight to force it down.

"Ha...ha...ha," the organ wheezed jerkily. "Stupid dung-faced shoat." The volume increased with every pump on the lever.

"Where there is light, there can be no darkness and no extra room," Kenda shouted into the growing din. "So believe we all." She began lighting the wicks from a taper. "It's working," she shouted at Tadzo, though she didn't see any evidence of that at all. The insults were still coming fast and thick.

"Hallelujah!" he yelled back. The imp stopped suddenly for a moment, then continued its verbal bombardment with a fury. But at a slightly reduced volume, Kenda noticed. She kept lighting candles.

"Hallelujah, hallelujah!" Tadzo kept shouting. She never realized how long it took to light that many candles. By the time the whole console case was ablaze with light, the first candles were burning dangerously low. But the imp's voice was down to a whisper on a single reed pipe. Kenda lit the last votive and the whisper died.

"Hallelujah, hallelujah!"

"All right, enough." Kenda waved her hands at the boy to get his attention. "It's gone."

He jumped down from the bellows lever. "For good? Or do we have to light candles every time we..."

"For good," she interrupted quickly. "Definitely for good."

He grinned. "Hallelujah!"

The mass was ended and the parishioners went in peace. The last chords of the postlude died away in the chapel, and Kenda slid off the bench to collapse in a heap against the balustrade. She'd done it. The Gloria wasn't her best and there was that obviously wrong note in the Sanctus, but the rest had been acceptable. Good, even. How she had managed to make it through the service without falling asleep at the keyboard, she couldn't imagine. She had to get some rest before the next service.

She nodded a dismissal to the acolyte who was manning the bellows for an exhausted Tadzo and considered the possibility of sleeping right there in the loft. No, too scandalous, she decided.

She was hoisting herself up when she heard a heavy footsteps on the wooden treads. *Now what?* she wondered. The rotund shape of Father Superior Marcus-Augustus appeared in the stairwell.

"Well played, Chapelmaster," he said, coming to rest on the top step.

"You do me honor, Monsignor," said Kenda, dipping her head. "I hoped I pleased His Grace as well."

The priest looked suddenly less comfortable. "Pleased is not quite the word for His Grace's reaction. He was unable to sleep much of the night for the volume of your practicing."

"A fluke. There will be no more late-night practicing."

Monsignor nodded. "That is for the best, my daughter. Quite for the best. In view of His Grace's reservations about you."

Kenda covered her apprehension with a forced smile. "Of course, Monsignor. My, uh, appointment is secure, then?"

He half-shrugged, half nodded. "For the nonce. Just be circumspect in the night hours. Otherwise — quite frankly, the parish couldn't afford to keep you in candles." He started to descend. "Oh, and watch your way through the churchyard when you leave," he added. "Most peculiar. It's been thick with toads all morning."

❧

JONATHAN SHIPLEY lives in Fort Worth, Texas, earning a livelihood as a computer instructor and professional musician. When not teaching or playing, he devotes himself to writing and restoring the turn-of-the-century residence that has been his family home for almost two decades.

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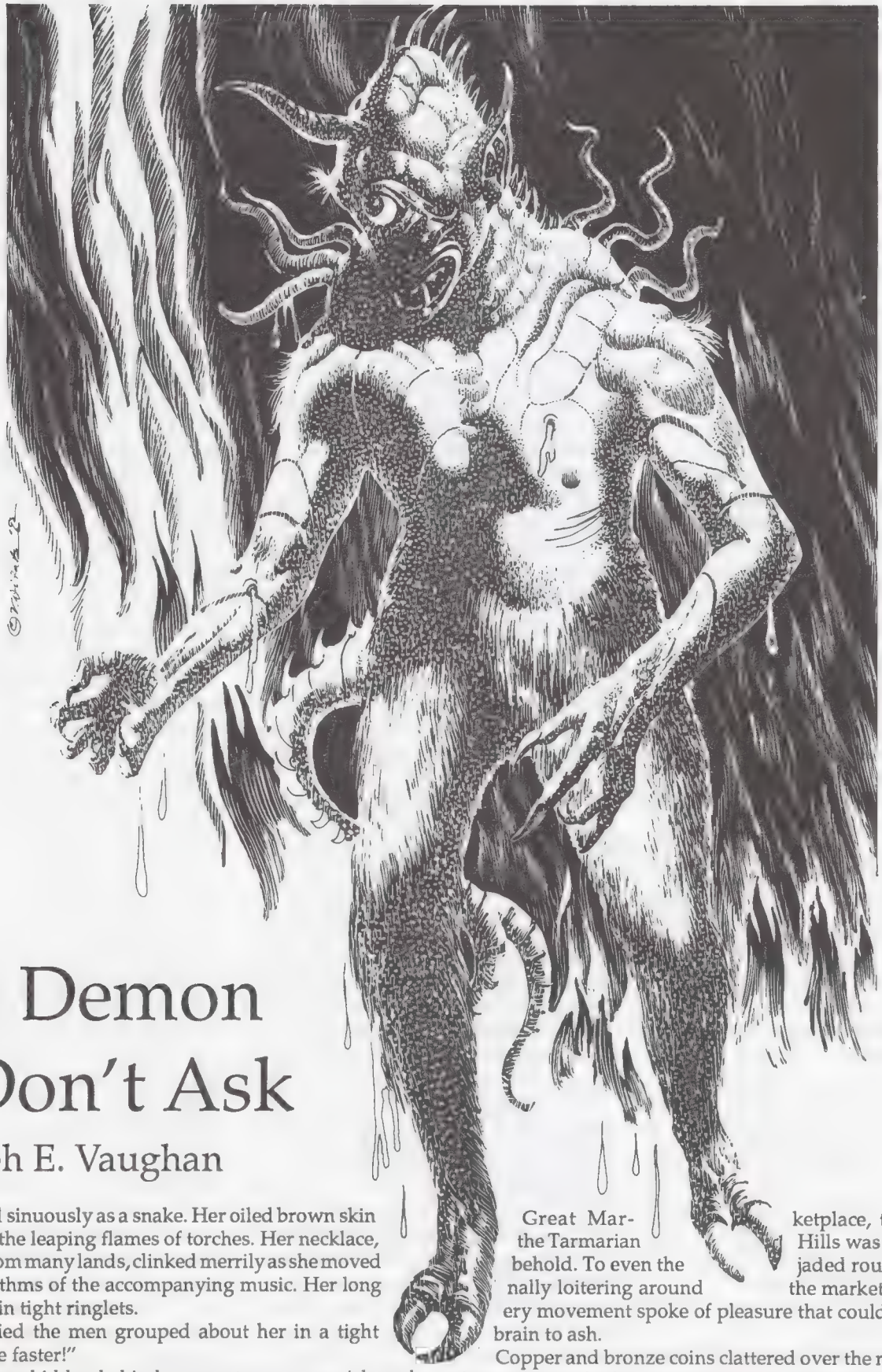

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

The Demon of Don't Ask

by Ralph E. Vaughan

Tyiir danced sinuously as a snake. Her oiled brown skin glinted under the leaping flames of torches. Her necklace, linked coins from many lands, clinked merrily as she moved to the rich rhythms of the accompanying music. Her long black hair fell in tight ringlets.

"Dance!" cried the men grouped about her in a tight cluster. "Dance faster!"

The musicians, hidden behind an ornate screen, quickened the pace. Ten-stringed larlaras and reedy instruments whispered erotically. Tyiir's bare feet beat a quick tattoo.

Even among the many beauties always entertaining in the Great Marketplace, this girl from the Tarmarian Hills was something to behold. To even the jaded roustabouts eternally loitering around the marketplace, her every movement spoke of pleasure that could sear a man's brain to ash.

Copper and bronze coins clattered over the raised stage as the music reached a crescendo. Tyiir's eyes were very sharp, especially when it came to spying treasures among dross, so she instantly saw the gold coin as it clattered among the offerings; she followed the path of the coin back to the hand that had

tossed it and forced a smile — the richer, the older; this man must be very rich indeed.

The caravan had entered the wealthy trade center of Mourvyn that daybreak, renting a space in the Great Marketplace for a week. Here, Tyiir hoped to earn enough so she never again had to journey with the caravans as they made their summer treks to the cities of the wastelands, between the Greylands and the western marshes. It was Tyiir's dream to own a great house in the lower reaches of the Tarmarian Hills, where the monied families dwelled, with servants to command and to execute when they displeased her.

Tyiir finished her dance in a swirl of filmy fabric and smiled invitingly at the disgusting old man as the threadbare curtain fell. She scooped her coins and rushed to her wagon. She placed the coppers and bronzes in her hiding place, for every coin, no matter how small, brought her a pace closer to her goal, but she held on to the gold coin, feeling its weight, loving the way it sparkled even in the wan light of her single candle. She added the coin to her necklace and hid it where no one would ever find it.

A knock sounded hesitantly at the door of her wagon, the sort of knock made by a nervous old man with unfamiliar lusts gnawing at his brain.

Tyiir arranged her limbs in a pleasing fashion, forced a smile and murmured: "Enter."

The door opened and the old man of the gold coin stepped through the shadows. Tyiir's smile became even more forced. He was an ancient, older even than Tyiir had first thought, all wrinkles and age spots, so frail a good wind would have knocked him over. He wore dark clothing, gold neck chains with fist-sized gems, and heavy gold rings on each finger.

"You are very lovely, my dear," the old man whispered. "An excellent dancer — I had no idea the human body was so flexible or could do so many...interesting things."

"You are most kind, my lord," Tyiir replied, leaning forward slightly. "My name is Tyiir, and I would be most pleased to dance for you...privately."

The old man grinned. "How old are you, my little Tyiir?"

"Young, my lord," she replied. "Very young."

"I am called Malthuza."

"I am yours to command, Lord Malthuza."

Malthuza reached into his purse and withdrew two large gold coins. He rubbed them together, and Tyiir shivered at the sound.

Tyiir stood and moved toward her sleeping chamber, parting the silken veils that separated it from the rest of the wagon. Within was her most precious secret — a bed magicked by a sorcerer of the Southern Forest of Hyadajz, a senile love-struck sorcerer; in this bed, a man could be convinced that a minute of pleasure was a lifetime of ecstasy, and Tyiir could retain her honor.

Malthuza dropped the gold pieces into his purse, where they clinked disappointedly among their brothers.

"Not here, my dear," the old man said.

"Where?" Tyiir asked, suddenly wary.

"At a place I own," he replied. Seeing the look of apprehension on the girl's face, he added quickly: "No harm will come to you. I only wish to see you dance."

The girl let the veils fall across her sleeping chamber and said: "Very well, Lord Malthuza."

"You had better put on something warmer and a little less revealing," Malthuza said. "We have a bit of a walk before us, but I assure you it shall be made worth your while."

Tyiir slipped on a hooded cloak. "Where exactly are we going, my lord?"

"Don't Ask," he replied. Don't Ask! Those were the last words she had expected to hear from the rich old gentleman. A villa in the well-to-do southern suburbs or even an estate in the merchant's quarter of the city...but Don't Ask? Tyiir rethought the situation. Don't Ask was due north of the Great Marketplace. At one time it might have had another name, but no one remembered it now. Even a traveler such as Tyiir had heard of the infamous Don't Ask of Mourvyn. Over the centuries, it had become a city within a city, a haven for every sort of evil. Behind its facade of inns and shops, Don't Ask was a twisted warren of unnamed alleys, haunted underground vaults and secret rivers that vanished deep into the earth.

It was a very bad place for a young girl to venture into at any time, especially in the company of a stranger. But Malthuza did have gold, and his talk promised more. Gold was a balm that could soothe Tyiir's deepest fears; enough gold could absolve a man of any sin better than the blue-robed priests of Kolvar. And Malthuza did have lots of gold. What else mattered? Tyiir was sure that if worse came to worse, the old man's frailty would be his greatest weakness.

Tyiir departed her wagon holding onto the arm of the infirm old man; she felt as if she were supporting him rather than he escorting her, and that made her feel safer.

Even though it was late, the Great Marketplace was a hubbub of activity. Itinerant merchants were always packing to go elsewhere, but others waited to take their places. The Marketplace was crowded with all levels of society. They passed the edge of the Great Marketplace and saw thickly clustered stalls, leased by the year by fat merchants who sat within like great glaring spiders.

Abruptly, Tyiir was beyond the realm of mercantile activity, as if she had entered another country, one of silence and shadows, where people flowed through the streets like smoke. Mourvyn lay under the cover of night, but the darkness shrouding Don't Ask was even deeper.

"Don't be afraid, my little Tyiir," the old man said, patting her hand when he felt her shudder.

What reassured Tyiir was not the touch of Malthuza's withered hand but the sound of the gold in his purse.

Dark alleyways branched in all directions. Man and girl moved through a sea of darkness. Sounds of merriment and terror came from all around them, but always from a great distance. The night currents carried exotic perfumes and hashish-dreams. The dimly-lit shaded windows opening onto the alleys had the appearance of dead skin.

Tyiir was puzzled by the fact that they saw no others during their walk. A rich old man and a beautiful girl were easy marks to coves and coshers, but they saw no one, only shapes and shadows that might have been people, but which vanished into the obscurity of night at their approach. Tyiir was nervous now; only by concentrating on piles of gold could Tyiir keep from fleeing in terror back to the safety of her wagon, where awkward merchants' sons waited with fistfuls of coppers.

"Not much farther, my dear," Malthuza murmured, as if reading her thoughts.

"You have a home here, my lord?"

"One of the many places I own in the city," he replied. "But I do not live here. It is a workshop of sorts; my place of business, you might say, where I make my gold."

Before Tyiir could ask just what that business might be, Malthuza announced they had arrived. They stood before a doorway carved with arcane symbols.

Malthuza passed his hand over the surface of the door; blue bolts of energy leaped between hand and door, and the door opened silently.

"You are a wizard," Tyiir breathed, taking a step back from the opening.

Malthuza smiled and shrugged. "Does it matter?"

Tyiir shook her head and entered. A love-struck sorcerer had helped her before; maybe this relationship would prove equally rewarding, if not more so.

The door closed behind her and she followed Malthuza deeper into the structure. When she saw a creature with an ape's body and a cobra's head lurking in a side passageway, she began to doubt the wisdom of coming here. Before Tyiir could dwell long upon her misjudgment, something struck her from behind and oblivion claimed her.

Awareness returned to Tyiir in a flood of light and sensation. She tried to move and discovered herself captive, manacles binding ankles and wrists, upon a cold stone slab.

Malthuza stood on the opposite site of the small circular chamber from her. Between them was a magick circle etched into the stone floor. Malthuza was flanked by two bizarre beings—the cobra-headed ape and a red boy with a fish's head. Tyiir struggled against her bonds.

"How young and strong you are," Malthuza murmured. He gestured toward the fish-headed boy. "Mathematica does not know his own strength and sometimes gets carried away by the excitement of the moment. It is gratifying to see that his muscles were no match for your stamina."

"What do you want?" Tyiir demanded, writhing against her bonds.

Malthuza licked his cracked lips. "A beautiful body indeed. So full of youth and vitality. It is a shame that such vigor is wasted on the young, who are always so foolish. So full of life..."

Tyiir forced a smile. "Is this it, my lord. Are your dreams fashioned of iron and leather?"

"How old do I seem?" Malthuza asked.

"Oh, not very old at all, my lord."

"Always the flatterer," Malthuza said with a dry laugh. "You probably think me the oldest man you have even seen, but I am only thirty-three."

Tyiir gasped. It was the magick, of course. Everybody knew the old maxim: Three score years and ten for the races of men, but much less for wizards and all their kin. Magick aged a man—days and weeks for minor spells, months and years for powerful incantations. Even Tyiir's lover in the Southern Forest of Hyadajz had been young but had magicked himself into the realm of senility — how malleable he had been in her hands!

"Yes, you know about the Price, do you?" Malthuza said grimly. "But what would you say if I told you I have been this age — the age you see me now — sixteen times?"

"My lord," she said. "About the gold..."

"There is only one thing on your little mind," Malthuza accused. "No local girl would have come with me and few travelers would have followed me into Don't Ask. Your greed shall be your undoing."

"You're not going to pay me, my lord?"

"You are going to die!" Malthuza snapped impatiently. "I will purchase my years with your blood. When I discovered the terrible price of magick, I resolved to find a way to escape its finality. The demons of the underworld have

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the power to roll back the years of a man, but the problem is finding the proper demon with the necessary powers, not an easy task since most demons look alike. I persevered and discovered the secret names which summon and bind. The demon will give me back the youth that has fled. The cost is your life, but I consider the price to be small. Very small."

"I can make you feel young, my lord," Tyiir offered.

Malthuza sighed. "A shame such beauty cannot be paired with equal intelligence. Ah well, I need only your youth."

Malthuza began to chant in the Forbidden Tongue, the guttural language of the lower domains. His familiars moved away from him, cowering near the doorway. As Malthuza chanted, energies from other dimensions crackled around him and within the magick circle. The patterns of his words opened a portal into infernal regions. Through that portal, accompanied by a clap of thunder and a billow of sulfurous smoke, stepped a truly disgusting creature.

Tyiir's eyes stung from the smoke; she wrinkled her nose against the stink of the being. He had only one eye, and that one eye did not seem very secure in its socket. Slime oozed from the pores of his skin and dripped to the floor in long strings. A single red horn erupted from his scaly brow. Fangs protruded from between yellow lips; blue hair sprouted from the most unlikely places. Tyiir gasped at the sight.

"I have summoned you once more from the Pit to do my bidding!" Malthuza intoned. "I command you to roll back the years of my life. As before, I offer a blood sacrifice."

"Huh?" said the demon. "You are my slave," Malthuza uttered. "I have summoned you and bound you. I command you."

The demon looked about the circular chamber as if confused. His gaze fell upon the lithe form of Tyiir and he froze.

"I command you in the name of Belamak, in the name of Physithlethia, and in the name of the Unspeaking One," Malthuza chanted, gesturing. Blue flames followed the movements of his hands.

The demon did not turn his gaze from Tyiir. "Pretty."

"Harken to me!" the frustrated wizard screamed. "Do my will or suffer the pain of my wrath."

The demon turned to Malthuza, planted his taloned hands on his hips and snorted.

"Take the years of this wench and give them to me!" Malthuza instructed. "Her soul will become your plaything."

The demon looked at Tyiir, then back to Malthuza, pointing. "She's pretty."

A bolt of lightning leaped from the demon's extended forefinger, engulfing Malthuza, incinerating him where she stood. The two familiars looked at the smoking ashes, then fled. The demon pointed his finger at Tyiir, and her bonds turned to smoke.

Tyiir sat up, fighting nausea, fear and disappointment. Not only would she die at the hands of this demon, she was not going to see another gold coin; but she forced a smile.

"You're very pretty, miss," the demon said. "I am glad my cousin sent me in his place. He was getting sick of Malthuza. He didn't mind doing it twice or even thrice, but sixteen times?" He looked Tyiir up and down. "He didn't tell me there would be a pretty girl."

Tyiir crossed her legs and leaned back slightly. "This your first time in our world?"

The demon chuckled and looked down bashfully. "My first time anywhere."

"Would you like to see me dance?" Tyiir asked. The demon nodded enthusiastically. "I would need music." The demon waved his hand, and a trio of musicians, all demonic, appeared in the room. The hellish music they played was unfamiliar to Tyiir, but she danced to it as if her life depended upon it, as she was sure it did. At the end of what seemed hours, the music came to an end, the demons vanished, and Tyiir was left alone.

She looked around, sighed and gathered her cloak from a hook on the wall. She looked at the ashes on the floor and thought: An unprofitable night all around.

As she reached the door, she heard a familiar sound behind her and turned. A shower of gold coins cascaded from a taloned hand extending through the stone wall.

That same night, Tyiir deserted the caravan and headed for the Tarmarian Hills.

❧

RALPH E. VAUGHAN has written sf, fantasy, and mystery short stories, articles about the Old West, and two novelettes: "The Adventure of the Ancient Gods" (1990) and "Sherlock Holmes: The Dreaming Detective" (1992). He lives in Chula Vista, California, with his family.

VINCENT DIFATE will be a Guest of Honor at MagiCon.

The Last Word

Getting an issue out, finished, to the printer, and then immediately starting on the next issue, is a bit like the death of royalty: "the King is dead. Long live the King!" Issue 16 is dead. Long live issue 17! Each issue seems like the best you've ever done (or else you should be doing something else besides publishing!). But I hope you have enjoyed issue 16 and are looking forward to issue 17, which we plan to have out before the WorldCon in Orlando, on Labor Day weekend.

Issue 17's cover is already here, a beautiful George Barr rendition for our cover story about Pan by Sue Young Wilson. Other authors you will see in that issue are Darrell Schweitzer, Roger Russell, Dorothy J. Heydt, and Larry Hammer. (Who says we don't publish stories by men!?) Artwork will be by Rob Alexander, Barb Armata, Vincent Di Fate, and a talented newcomer to our pages, Sandra Templeton.

We have also bought a beautiful cover by Janny Wurts, a painting she called "Wizard of the Owls".

I recently saw a book so beautifully produced, I had to mention it here even though I have not had a chance to read it. When I was a child, the library had some books which included interior color plates, often with a piece of tissue paper set in front of them to keep the artwork from being scratched. But modern books are seldom illustrated at all, and if the are, it is usually small pen-and-ink drawings perhaps at the start of some of the chapters. The magazine field is the only place you commonly see much in the way of story illustration (which is part of why I love my job here). But Del Rey Books recently issued a hardcover anthology of fairy tales called **ONCE UPON A TIME**, edited by Lester del Rey and Risa Kessler, with both a color cover and interior color plates by Michael Pangrazio! The illustrations are quite as beautiful as anything I remember. I recommend you seek this book out in your local bookstore and buy a copy for yourself or as a gift to your favorite young person. It'll set you back $25, but with more and more paperbacks costing over $20, this seems like a bargain for the chance to provide such inspiration to your imagination.

Marion's fans will be interested in her convention plans for the rest of the year, since that is the only way most of you will get a chance to meet her or renew your acquaintance. She will be at VikingCon in Bellingham, WA, from Aug. 7-9; at World Fantasy in Atlanta, GA, Oct. 29-Nov. 1; and at the Darkover Grand Council Meeting in Timonium, MD, from Nov. 27-29. She will also be at next year's WesterCon in Seattle over the July 4 holiday.

— *Rachel E. Holmen*

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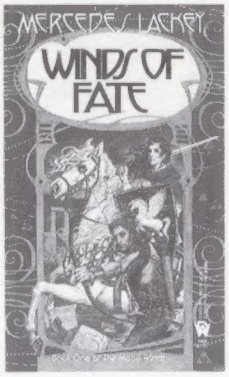

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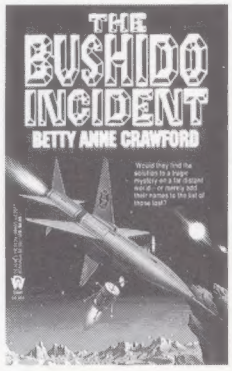

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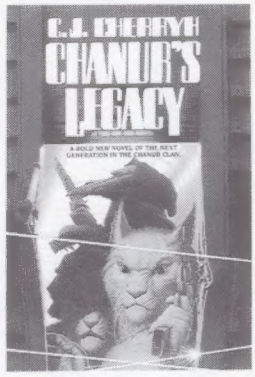

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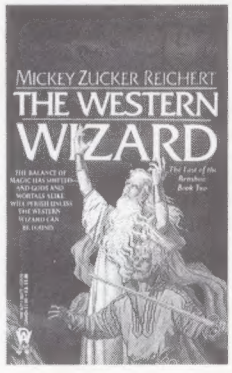

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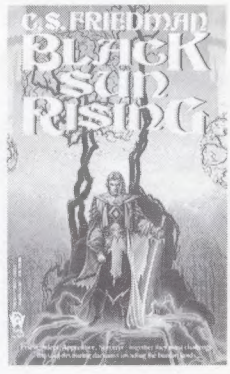

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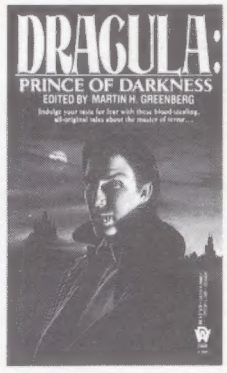

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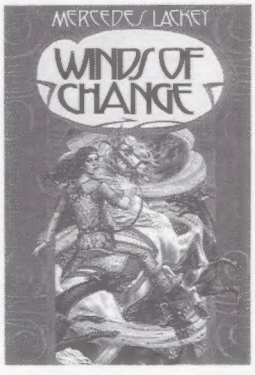

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